

North Devon Conservatives

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Concern raised over Government cuts to local schools and colleges

Double whammy of cuts to sixth form funding and to colleges' building programmes

Philip Milton, Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for North Devon, today demanded that Government Ministers reassure schools and colleges across North Devon, facing cuts to their funding because of Whitehall blundering.

Sixth form cuts: After telling schools and sixth form colleges how much funding they would receive next year for teaching 16-18 year olds, the Learning and Skills Council, a Government quango suddenly changed its mind. It failed to predict the number of students accurately. It has now cut school budgets across the country by up to £350,000 for sixth form colleges and £55,000 for an average school. Philip Milton is demanding action to ensure that local schools and sixth form colleges in North Devon will not have to turn away students next year because of this gross bureaucratic incompetence.

College building cuts: This latest catastrophe comes just weeks after the Government froze 144 further education college building projects, including North Devon College – see table below. Philip is calling on the Government to come clean about what will happen to these projects.

Together, these Government blunders could deprive thousands of young people of the opportunity to study.

Philip commented:

“Just a month after reassuring schools that they would be fully funded, the Government has pulled the rug from under their feet. Because of Whitehall incompetence, schools and colleges are being forced to turn away thousands of sixth formers who are desperate to learn and acquire the qualifications they need to succeed.

“Further education colleges have also been plunged into financial turmoil by having their building projects frozen. This is yet more proof that the Labour Government is failing to deliver and can't be trusted with taxpayers' money.”

Notes to Editors

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SCHOOL FUNDING CUTS

Learner numbers miscalculated: The Department for Children Schools and Families failed to anticipate that there would be an increase in the number of pupils staying on in schools and colleges post-16. There were “predictions of a falling cohort and a participation rate of 78%. This resulted in predictions (by DCSF) that... provision would not grow in 2009/10... [but] we have seen significant increases in recruitment” (*Learning & Skills Council letter to schools and colleges*, 30 March 2009).

Learning and Skills Council announces funding cuts: On 9 January, the Learning and Skills Council wrote to schools and sixth form colleges giving provisional funding allocations for 2009-10. On 2 March, the Learning and Skills Council wrote again to confirm the funding. They indicated that the number of learners was ‘in excess of the anticipated number’ and that they were seeking permission to fund the learners in full. On 30 March, the LSC wrote a third time, revising their ‘final’ allocation, and cutting funding for schools and sixth forms.

The Association of School and College Leaders has said a sixth form of 250 pupils would be £50,000 to £55,000 worse off next year, while a sixth form college of 3,000 would lose around £350,000 (*BBC News Online*, 31 March 2009).

Funding reduced: Funding has been reduced in three key ways: The Government originally promised an annual increase of at least 2.1 per cent in funding per learner – the ‘Minimum Funding Guarantee’ – for all school sixth forms with a funding rate per ‘standard learner number’ under £3,200. This has been scrapped. Schools and colleges which have recruited above their allocation in 2008-09 will not be funded for those learners in 2009-10. This means that learners already on the school or college rolls will not be funded next year – i.e. many students could face having their funding cut halfway through their course. The Government will only fund colleges and sixth forms at their average 2006-07 or 2007-08 levels – whichever is lower.

Ministers approved cuts: In their letter to schools and colleges the Learning and Skills Council confirmed that “[the Department for Children, Families & Schools] have been involved throughout and approved the changes and this briefing note” (*LSC letter to schools and colleges*, 30 March 2009).

COLLEGE BUILDING CUTS

The school cuts follow the Learning & Skills Council making cuts to plans for further education colleges’ building programmes.

- **144 colleges have had their building projects frozen –over a third of all colleges:** In early March, the Government announced that they would be a freeze on the 144 (*DIUS Press Release*, 4 March 2009). Many of these colleges have already started their building programmes, with the encouragement of the Government. The freeze will result in higher costs for institutions, in many cases running into millions of pounds.
- **No guarantee for colleges facing bankruptcy.** Sion Simon, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Further Education, refused to give an assurance that colleges would not face bankruptcy: ‘I can’t give you [an assurance they won’t go bust]’ (*BBC Radio 4, Today programme*, 19 March 2009).
- **The Government has known about the funding crisis since at least November:** Concerns over the affordability of the capital programme were expressed at a November 2008 LSC meeting. The November minutes had claimed that capital projects had not been considered due to a lack of time. But this was misleading. The December minutes contain a correction, stating that the “main underlying reason” capital projects had not been considered was due to ‘concern over affordability’ (LSC, *Minutes of National Council Meeting, 17 December 2008, released to Conservatives under the Freedom of Information Act*). Sources say the LSC had “known for months” but that DIUS had vetoed any advanced notice of the freeze (*Guardian*, 20 January 2009). The December meeting was attended by a representative of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills.

List of frozen capital projects

<i>College</i>	<i>Postcode (of main campus)</i>
North Devon College	EX31 2BQ

Source: Letter from LSC to David Willetts MP, 26 March 2009.
<http://www.parliament.uk/deposits/depositedpapers/2009/DEP2009-1013.pdf>

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