

Education spending: the truth, the whole truth and....

By Chris Waterman

Reporting from the IFS report launch event, London

On Monday 12 December 2022, there was an in-person launch of the *IFS Annual Report on Education Spending in England in 2022*, for some the first opportunity to meet colleagues over ham sandwiches (with whole-grain mustard) and egg wraps for the first time in a couple of years. I have to declare an interest, as I pay an annual subscription to IFS - one of the best value bargains in town.

The IFS annual report, the fifth of its kind, is eagerly awaited in the education sector, not by the DfE. The IFS is one of the few 'independent' think tanks that does what it says on the tin: objective reporting of robust data. Paul Johnson is becoming a bit of a media star who appears regularly in the broadcast media commenting on all matters financial.

It seems that the weather in London had decimated the 'live' audience, with problems on the trains (the wrong sort of snow?) and traffic much heavier than usual. After an excellent run through the report from Luke Sibietta, there was plenty of time and no shortage of questions from the audience in the room and online.

Before the questions, however, were excellent contributions from Robin Walker MP, self-styled gamekeeper turned poacher who is now chair of the Education Select Committee and licking his political lips at the thought of interrogating the Minister, Robert Halfon MP the following morning. Mark Lehain, Head of Education at the Centre for Policy Studies, offered his perspective and Evelyn Forde, Headteacher of Copthall School and President of ASCL spoke about the reality of the challenges facing secondary headteachers day in and day out.

Robin Walker spoke of the trepidation in the DfE ahead of the publication of the annual report. It seems that a question often asked in the DfE about a new policy is "Will this pass the IFS test?" The report itself, as usual, is packed with facts and high quality infographics (the slides can be viewed and a recording of the session can be found on the IFS website <https://ifs.org.uk/>).

There was little in the report that surprised the audience and no good news for education. Robin Walker MP took comfort from the fact that, after a decade of declining expenditure, there was a bit more money this year for education, but for the audience it was very cold comfort. There was, however, wide approval of the gradual shift in the balance of funding from higher education to early years education, but re-arranging the financial deck chairs was not anything of an answer.

Evelyn Forde spoke of the enormous pressure on schools to recruit and retain staff, with teachers having to use food banks set up by their schools. Dedicated support staff were leaving to do much less significant jobs as they were better paid. Schools were also expected to compensate for cuts made to the youth service and other local authority services, in addition to trying to look after the mental health of students – and teachers.

There was discussion about the cuts to further education and sixth form colleges, which IFS had found were in "a particularly difficult position" with FE colleges trying to cope with a fall of 14% in real terms in the last decade. The bottom line, which is where governors and head teacher are spending more time, is that total school spending per student fell by 9% between 2010 and 2020.

In spite of beginning what might be a gradual climb back to the funding levels of 2010, the consensus in the audience seems to be that education "had never had it so bad".

- *For a review of the IFS report, see the Document Review on pages 27 to 29.*