



# BHASVIC

11-12-24

By email

Dear Minister,

It is privilege to represent the Sixth form college sector on your newly formed FE Leaders Advisory Group and I look forward to the continued participation in those meetings.

You may recall in the last meeting I brought up the issue of workforce pay and looming strike action in the Sixth form college sector around the decision not to extend the funded 5.5% pay award to the 40 non-academised sixth form colleges. You may also recall I wrote to you about this decision back in August.

I'm writing again for three reasons. Firstly, to share my disappointment with the standard responses the government are using to defend this decision, secondly, to highlight the impact of this strike action on our students, and thirdly, to highlight why Sixth form colleges are different to General FE colleges, a point that I feel is continuously lost at the DfE.

## **Government responses**

Two of the responses used most commonly by the government to defend its decision not to extend the pay award to colleges, when this issue has been raised (via letters, media interviews or questions in the Commons) have been:

### *'Colleges set individual pay awards, not the government'*

- Sixth form colleges do not set pay at an individual level, it is set by the NJC (The NEU and the SFCA) using a national pay spine that the government has obliterated because of the arbitrary lines drawn at the DfE between academised and non-academised colleges.
- This year, half the institutions on this spine have received a pay award (the academised sixth form colleges) but half have not (including BHASVIC who remain unacademised). This means no pay settlement can be achieved for the sector.
- Additionally, the point that colleges set pay, not the government fails to acknowledge that the Conservative party matched a 6.5% funded pay award that schools received and extended it to colleges last year.

### *'The government has given £300m to colleges in the budget'*

- This is much appreciated BUT this isn't going to cover pay for this academic year
- These funds are available from April 2025 and are most likely to be needed to pay for additional students because of the demographic increase in 16 year olds.
- Any remaining funds are likely to go on the base rate which will benefit ALL post-16 providers – including school sixth forms and 16-19 academies, therefore the money is not just for 'FE'.

These responses are either disingenuous or lack an understanding of the sector, in particular the role of sixth form colleges within it.

The government spent £1.2bn on funding the school teacher pay award. The SFCA estimates that £20m would cover the 5.5% pay award for the 40 remaining Sixth form colleges. Such a sum is merely a rounding error in the context of the overall money spent. Please will the government reconsider, before even more time is lost to industrial action?

## **Impact of strike action**

The National Education Union is now undertaking discontinuous strike action in Sixth form colleges. Having already had three days, they have announced a further four, including 3 consecutive days at the start of the new year. This means we will have had 7 days of strike action between 28 November and 9 January. This will mean 7 days of lost teaching out of 19 working days.

Around 70% of my teaching staff will strike. The impact of this is beginning to take its toll on student's progress and the industrial action at the start of term will begin to hit BTEC exams, mock exams and practical work in many subjects. Strikes are intended to be disruptive and this one is beginning to have catastrophic impact, with more dates set to follow unless a settlement can be reached.

We share a playing field with a large secondary school that has a sixth form 'college'. Those students are not losing precious learning time. Those staff are getting paid more than mine for doing exactly the same work. The only difference is the designation of our institutions.

BHASVIC is often described as the 'jewel in the crown' of education in Brighton and Hove. But what does this decision mean in terms of recruitment and retention of quality teaching staff? Surely, staff will begin to go to the provider who is able to offer them more pay?

The cynic in me feels that as this strike is not gaining the media traction of national primary/secondary industrial action, and college age students do not need a parent to take time off work to deal with it, suggests that this industrial action will continue to be shrugged off by the department without acknowledging the real impact it is having on thousands of students.

## **Sixth form colleges are different to General FE Colleges**

Whilst I don't think it is fair, I can see the rationale behind why the government chose not to extend this pay award to General Further Education colleges, whose pay and conditions are often very different to school teachers and set locally at an institutional level.

Sixth form colleges, however, are different. It is this point that I feel is continuously lost on the government. The NJC pay spine has always kept up with the STRB recommendations and we have been able to maintain parity with the school sector.

The SFCA is 'provider blind' and home to both academised and non-academised Sixth form colleges. In Surrey and Sussex, we have 'S7' a collaborative network of the SFCs focused on sharing quality improvement and staff development. This group have been split in two by the decision to extend the pay award to academised SFCs. It is damaging the sector and the systems leadership we provide to our local school networks.

There is an implied 'if you don't like it, then academise' response to this issue from some, but should we be penalised for not academising when the local context around academisation in Brighton and Hove has been hostile to such a designation, including from a Labour led council?

I know you are personally disappointed by the decision to exclude colleges from the pay award, but you have the power to be able to do something about this situation. Admitting that excluding non-academised sixth form colleges from the pay agreement was an oversight will be a show of strength from the department. A sign it has been listening to the sector and taking time to get decisions right. We are not able to wait for the comprehensive spending review and do not want this to have to be resolved by a judicial review.

We held out so much hope for this government but I'm afraid my governors, my staff, my students and their parents feel bitterly disappointed and let down by this decision. Please will you reconsider.

Yours sincerely,



William Baldwin. Principal - BHASVIC