



Education. Where next???

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The last few months have seen an unprecedented degree of churn in the ministerial team at the Education department - with five different Secretaries of State in just 4 months.

Rishi Sunak's arrival as PM has ushered in further change - but reassuringly this involves the return of former ministers, who already have experience of their portfolios.

The new Secretary of State is Gillian Keegan, who formerly held the

Apprenticeship and Skills portfolio. This signals an intention of the new PM to make skills, apprenticeships and productivity a priority of the Education Department. The highly experienced Nick Gibb returns as Schools Minister - for his third stint in this job (possibly a record!).

The new Skills Minister is the well regarded Rob Halfon - formerly Chair of the Education Select Committee. Halfon was also Skills Minister from 2016-2017.

In short, the DFE now has a much more experienced ministerial team, and a Prime Minister who seems to want to give education a higher priority - particularly work related education and training. There are indications that the government will seek to review the scope of the 16-19 curriculum, possibly including more maths and English provision, and boost vocational education.

An early challenge for the new team will be the fiscal statement which is now due on 17th November. To fill the "hole" in UK public finances, the Treasury has been asking departments - including DFE - to model the impacts of large cuts in their budgets. But the education system is already facing a squeeze on its real budgets because of much higher than expected inflation. It can ill afford to see budget cuts if it is to address issues such as Covid related learning losses, teacher shortages, and the expectations around improved vocational education. Recent exam data shows that much of the closing of the disadvantage gap over the last decade was reversed over the period of the pandemic - this urgently needs addressing.

The new Secretary of State faces stiff competition for limited government cash, with the health and defence departments both making strong claims for more money, and with benefit and pension spending rising sharply because of higher inflation.

Sunak has put in a better team at Dfe, with real experience. He now needs to determine how much financial support he can provide to allow this team to address the challenges facing them.

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