



HOUSE OF COMMONS

10 May 2019

The Rt Hon Anne Milton MP
Minister of State for Apprenticeships and Skills
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

Dear Anne,

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me earlier this week. As promised, I thought it would be useful to set out clearly my concerns about the future of the College and all parts of the Hadlow Group, both in the short term and longer term.

First, I know you understand the uncertainty that the financial situation is causing many people across the community. Not just staff and students at Hadlow College, West Kent College and Hadlow Rural Community School, but also those local businesses who work closely with the Group helping them to provide a wide range of services and educational facilities to young people from right across Kent and the south east. It is in everyone's interest that this matter is brought to a conclusion as quickly as possible.

I am grateful for the communication over the past few weeks from both yourself and the Further Education Commissioner, Richard Atkins, as well as your work stabilising the financial situation in the immediate term. However, I'm sure you will understand that it is in the interests of all in the community to have this matter resolved as soon as possible.

First, I would be grateful if you could articulate the measures which the Department for Education is considering which would resolve the financial situation. Options, as far as I can see, would include a financed recovery authorised by the Secretary of State through loaning Hadlow Group the money, declaring the Hadlow Group insolvent or putting it into administration.

If the first of these options is to be pursued, then I would appreciate further discussion with the Department regarding the local impact in Tonbridge and Malling. Hadlow Group owns around 300 acres of land, much of it in and around the village of Hadlow itself, and all of it is critical to the courses which students take at the college. We have already seen at the West Kent College site in Tonbridge land which was previously a car park sold to Ashill for potential housing development, despite existing parking pressures in the immediate vicinity. I am keen to avoid a situation where the proposed action by the Department would result in the loss of existing assets used by students.

Consequently, any action which results in the Hadlow Group keeping hold of its existing assets is one which I would support. If maintaining courses and students is to be the priority,

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which you know I have argued strongly for, then existing land will need to be retained for this purpose. Hadlow College and Hadlow Rural Community School in particular offer land based agricultural courses and learning methods which are unique and not replicated by any other provider around. It is essential that learning here remains.

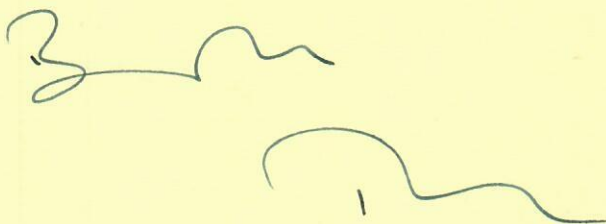
In addition, I appreciate that the Hadlow Group has interest in developments across Kent, and would ask for your consideration of the priority of these developments, in line with the educational needs of 10,000 studying across the Group. I am aware that the Betteshanger Colliery, for example, saw an additional £1.2million spent on changing plans for the foundations of a visitor centre, and £4million lost when the sale of a business park fell through. While this project is very important in the Betteshanger area, I would be concerned if further investment is made here in light of the financial situation should courses to be cut, students left unable to gain their qualifications and businesses who rely on work with the Hadlow Group at its existing sites are unable to see these projects carried through.

This leads on to the future of Ashford College, where the interest from East Kent Colleges is reported and again if a change here were to be pursued to protect the education of students, then I am sure this would be welcomed. As you know, I am also working with Damian Green MP on this and would be grateful if you could keep us both informed.

Finally, all of the ideas I have previously mentioned are incumbent on the Government choosing the right way forward in managing this situation without forcing students out of courses, and local businesses out of clients. Therefore I'd be grateful if you could let me know, whatever option is chosen, how the debt will be managed and what the detailed plan is for reducing this. This is clearly dependent on students taking priority and I trust this will remain your overriding objective.

I hope this emphasises just how important Hadlow College, Hadlow Rural Community School and West Kent College are to residents and businesses across Tonbridge and Malling. Almost everyone in the town and surrounding villages will have attended or knows someone who has been educated at one of these educational facilities. It is essential that the financial situation is stabilised as soon as possible.

I look forward to continuing to work you, Richard and the interim leadership at the group to make sure this happens.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'T' followed by a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke.

TOM TUGENDHAT