**All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education**

**How can learning environments be improved?**

**Tuesday 2nd March 2021, 2.00pm**

Marcus Fysh MP (MF) opened the meeting and welcomed everyone to the APPG meeting. Explaining that the topic of the meeting was opportune as we look to children’s return to school, he suggested the meeting was used to think about how we can help to improve the learning environment aid students, in addition to the wonderful teaching workforce.

MF stated that he believe the learning environment to be an extremely important factor of education, and schools need to make good use of outdoor space. This will be an important factor in construction of new classrooms, and how existing classrooms can be utilised. As schools return, we also need to think about how to bring fresh air into classrooms and how to manage larger class sizes.

Speaking Panel:

Caroline Wright (Director General, British Educational Suppliers Association)

Murray Hudson (Co-author of Planning Learning Spaces and Managing Director of Gratnells)

Rob Abrahams (Managing Director of Morleys)

Terry White (Former headteacher, chair of the Association for Learning Environments in the UK)

Caroline Wright (CW) thanked the APPG for considering this issue. CW introduced BESA – the trade association for educational suppliers, including specialist furniture manufacturers, as well as textbooks, Ed Tech and equipment.

Murray Hudson (MH) told the Group that the COVID pandemic has given those outside education sector a real appreciation for the first time of the vital role that education place and space play. According to the DfE, most schools are more than 40 years old, with two thirds built before 1976. The average life span of a school is no more than 60 years, therefore we need to build more than 350 new schools a year – this year we will built 100. There is also a £1bn outstanding repair bill. Classrooms in new build have got smaller. Average class size in UK is 26, the largest in Europe. With social distancing, teachers will be able to fit 12 children in a classroom.

Professor Peter Barratt in his Clever Classrooms report highlights the most important factors – right light, flexibility and fresh air being the most important. Get them right up to 60% increase in attainment.

Teaching methods and set up have changed dramatically because of COVID – but changes are short term.

Rob Abrahams (RA) stated that many of the problems schools faced over the last year are due to inflexible classrooms – industry worked with schools to find best solutions. Main areas of focus was trying to use space to best effect, which meant re-think on design as quickly as possible. Not just classrooms, schools looked to use all areas such as labs, dining halls. Corridors and walkways became really important with one-way systems and screens and other sanitising products for backrooms such as offices. Clear that place and space could not cope, in part due to traditional layout, which is driven by DfE guidelines. Better spaces can be created with better engagement with users (ie) teachers – do not need to change a lot to really make a difference. Huge creativity within the industry to support schools, enhance learning and become more resilient to situations such as COVID.

Terry White (TW) began by stating that it must be considered that children returning to school will be at different stages of learning and emotional development. In addition, the use of IT for learning has thrown up issues relating to access and equity. All these pose major challenges and sit alongside current models of organisation in schools which are predicated on pupils all being at the same level within year groupings. Solutions have to be innovative and integrate all young people. Wellbeing strategy must be integrated in school design. Need to get back to engaging with schools, learners and young people. Need to bust the myth that engagement costs time and money and makes little difference. Experiences over the last year challenges this concept.

The panel were then questioned on :

How can schools and educators interactor with suppliers better – what procurement barriers are in place for designing things right when designing new schools or re-modelling parts of an existing one?

Lots of red tape and traditional mindset (teacher standing at front, students behind desks). Research tends to be more than 20 years old. If there was a better understanding on how layout impacts attainment, outcomes would be different. Procurement needs to consider learning objectives, starting from inside out rather than the other way round where there is little or no departure from traditional frameworks.

Often teachers are not included in the process. Also make external landscape an integral part of learning environments. However, this needs to turn thinking on its head to work out how to achieve this without massively increasing costs.

How can we promote innovation in design – can we get owners of sites more involved? Are there competitions to design innovative educational spaces, or it a closed shop.

Process is about compliance rather than learning objectives. There is experience and knowledge out there – needs a push to get all parties talking

The issue of asbestos in old schools is not been addressed – is there any leverage to get that sorted? What about re-furbs of Victorian buildings without much outside space, or weather in certain locations does not allow for much outdoor learning.

Building designs can be innovative to create additionality of space – example given of school building in Norway where sloping roofs used to create extra outdoor space that can be used all year round.

COVID presents a real opportunity with new school refurbishments, but needs mindset – concerns are that tradition will continue. 2-3% of spend FFE and yet it has such a huge impact. Often done at the last minute.

Actions

Are there any exemplars that have crept outside cookie cutter system to show colleagues in the UK

Yes ! System not in state sector does it very well, but there are state schools that have been innovative, engaging with the local community. Speakers happy to supply examples.

CW believes that sharing knowledge with decision makers is vital. She cited the example of BESA working in partnership with DfE running regional Ed Tech roadshows, with BESA members giving peer to peer advice to teachers. Have more than a dozen other companies who could do a similar exercise for FF&E

The meeting concluded at 3pm and the Chair thanked all the speaker for their time.