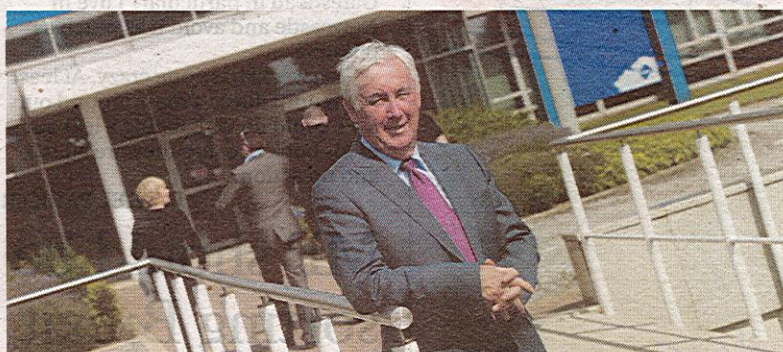


If we focus on change then the results will come



LES WALTON
COLUMNIST



► Les Walton has observed constant change in the education sector

CHARLES Darwin said "It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive but those who can best manage change."

To fear change is to fear the opportunities of new possibilities. The self-esteem of those involved in change is therefore critical. So here is a story of government changes, restructures, rebrandings and reorganisations.

In April 2017, I will have been chair of the Learning Skills Council (LSC), Young People's Committee; chair of the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA) and chair of the Education Funding Agency (EFA) advisory group over a period of eight years.

I have observed at first hand the constant changes that major national funding education agencies have undergone.

In April 2001, the LSC was established, replacing the 72 Training and Enterprise Councils and the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) for England. With a budget of £12.07bn, the LSC was described as "Britain's largest quango".

In 2009, I was placed on the LSC as chair of the Young People's Committee by the then Secretary of State, Ed Balls. I was also appointed chair designate of the YPLA. My job was to work with the outgoing chair of the LSC, while at the same time lead the establishment of the YPLA, which was to open for business in April 2010.

In July 2009, the first council meeting I joined was rather despondent. They had known since March that the LSC was to be abolished and that funding responsibilities for 16 to 19-year-old learners were to transfer to the YPLA. Just before I took up my role on the LSC board, there was a major upset regarding the LSC management of the FEFC college building programme. The council had just been informed that the July Public Accounts Committee described the LSC's handling of its college building programme as "catastrophic mismanagement".

To lead the establishment of the successor agency within this climate was a major challenge. Both myself and Peter Lauener, the chief executive designate of the YPLA, believed the self-esteem of colleagues within

the LSC was a critical factor in our ability to create the YPLA. Every effort was then made to recognise the strengths of the previous regime. The key politicians we worked with, particularly our Minister Iain Wright, recognised the traditional model of "trashing the old to validate the new" was absolutely the wrong thing to do.

The YPLA, which included many staff from the LSC, therefore started with a great deal of goodwill, particularly from the outgoing organisation.

In the short life of the YPLA, the predominant feature was the ever-present and fundamental nature of change. We navigated through a successful reorganisation, which saw significant numbers of staff re-allocated to academy roles, a boost to our central data and systems capacity and provide more resource in financial assurance expertise.

A core part of our self-esteem came from the belief that we were good at responding to and embracing change.

The ability of the newly formed YPLA staff to focus on organisational improvement was even more remarkable as, on May 12, 2010, one month after the YPLA started, Michael Gove announced the bonfire of arm's-length bodies - the quangos. It was clear that the YPLA would not have a long lifespan.

One year later, the 2011 Education Act announced that the YPLA would cease to exist on March 31, 2012. Some statutory responsibilities reverted to the Secretary of State for Education, while many of the YPLA's functions were transferred to the newly-created EFA, an executive agency within the Department of Education.

Learning from the experience of the transition from the LSC to the YPLA, Peter Lauener and I considered that a smooth transition to the new organisation would work better if it involved the outgoing organisation. The new Conservative Secretary of State, Michael Gove, accepted our point of view and then wrote to Peter and I asking us to lead the transition from the YPLA to the EFA.

I must praise Michael Gove, who

supported the idea that the executive and the board would take leadership responsibility for transferring to the EFA. This meant that the board was both positive and proactive in supporting such a significant change in direction and proceeded to work with the Department for Education and Partnerships for Schools to ensure a smooth transition.

At the last board meeting, attended by Lord Jonathan Hill, the Under-Secretary of State, the final act was to pass a resolution commending all YPLA staff for their outstanding contribution to the YPLA and the support they had given to the establishment of the EFA. The achievements of the YPLA staff were immense, especially given the challenge of our changing remit and transition programme. We all felt hugely privileged to have been part of the YPLA. We all felt hugely proud to lead the establishment of our successor organisation.

The EFA was to be a very different organisation. It was an executive agency created to carry out ministerial orders or policy, unlike the YPLA which was more self-determining and enjoying greater independence.

Today, the EFA has an annual budget of £56.8bn - bigger than the gross domestic product of Saudi Arabia. It supports all state-provided education for eight million children aged three to 16, and 1.6 million young people aged 16 to 19, and educational support to those with high need. The EFA is also responsible for funding and monitoring academies, university technical colleges, studio schools, and free schools, as well as the building maintenance programmes for schools and sixth-form colleges.

Simply focusing on results will not lead to change. Focusing on change will get results. Change management requires the high level technical skills provided by colleagues within human resources, financial and legal services.

It all needs leaders who can create a climate in which there is a positive response to change.

■ Les Walton CBE, chair of the EFA Advisory Group