

# We broke new ground and gave this city a chance



**LES WALTON**  
COLUMNIST

**I**N 2000 a highly-critical report on Bradford Local Education Authority by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) was published. Bradford was ranked 137th out of 150 in terms of GCSE results.

Bradford's neighbours at the bottom of the league tables were the likes of Manchester, Hull and Middlesbrough, urban areas that shared similar socio-economic problems.

In May I was asked to prepare an action plan for Bradford which addressed the key concerns within the Ofsted Report.

Then in August Sir Anthony Tippet, a former admiral was drafted in to chair the new Education Policy Partnership, and I was appointed by the DfE to work alongside him.

The combination of a Navy Vice Admiral and a history teacher is always an interesting model. Shortly afterwards a cartoon was published in the Telegraph and Argus depicting the Admiral with Coun David Ward, the Executive Member for Education and myself as the crew, attempting to steer a ship through Ofsted's stormy waters.

A deal was then struck with Bradford Council who agreed to appoint me to a new post of Assistant Chief Executive, with responsibility for education. Unusually, my salary was paid by central government.

On arrival in Bradford I was greeted by the headlines in the Bradford Telegraph and Argus, "New schools chief on the cheap". A fair description of the situation.

The bombshell decision to remove control of education services from Bradford Council was then announced by the Schools Standards Minister. This changed the whole situation. I was then asked to lead the interim management of the education service and chair the procurement process, which eventually led to the outsourcing of Bradford education services to the private sector.

The challenge was not whether local authorities should oversee schools but how.

How could a local authority do things differently? Options were considered - change the leadership, develop a strategic partnership with a service organisation or outsource



**> Schoolchildren learning computer skills in a Bradford school in 1998. But not every lesson in the city was going as well - and Les Walton had a big job on his hands when he was invited to take a key role two years later**

the education services. The last option was the one that was chosen.

To oversee one of the biggest local authorities in the country, develop a response to one of the most critical Ofsted reports I had ever seen and support the outsourcing of the education services was a major task.

I, therefore, brought in a team of the best secondary, primary and special school head teachers in the UK.

I also identified the most able head teachers in Bradford who would work with me. Have no doubt this was radical in 1999. These teams of head teachers continued to work with me for more than a decade and were the core team in establishing the concept of School Improvement Partners initiated by the Northern Education Associates.

The minister, Estelle Morris, first introduced me to the secondary head teachers. I was extremely nervous, they were a formidable group.

The chair of the head teachers asked if I supported the Chief Executive's proposal to allocate an extra £6m to the secondary budget. (The secondary schools were £6m adrift from the national mean, whilst the primary schools were £3m below). I said I didn't agree with this imbalanced redistribution and introduced the concept of 'equal poverty'.

Or to put it another way, if the secondary schools would give up some of this extra funding to the primary schools, whilst both would be below the mean at least there would be fairness. This went down like a sponge leg in a flood.

I left the meeting feeling embarrassed, particularly as I had been told off by the head of Bingley Grammar for misquoting Thomas More.

I returned to my hotel wishing I had never taken the job. The next morning a deputation of head teachers came to the hotel, led by the Chair of the Group, to say that they had met after the meeting and agreed to the rebalancing of

the additional monies.

This was indeed a significant statement of intent to work in a value driven environment and to seek the moral consensus. The Bradford Telegraph and Argus had reported my desire to develop a 'new relationship with schools' based on the approach I had previously developed as a Director of Education.

For me that was more about building relationships based on partnership and principles, always putting the child at the centre.

The tender for outsourced education services was issued. It was the biggest contract ever issued for education services. The major services companies in the UK put their names forward. These included the Capital, Tribal, Nord Anglia, Amey and Serco. Serco won the 10-year contract to deliver the education services in Bradford.

There was a surprising degree of consensus across political parties to do things differently. We had a Labour Government encouraging the outsourcing of education services, working with a council with a Tory leader and a Liberal Executive Member for Education. They were united in their desire to do the best for children.

During the process one or two people across the political spectrum changed their minds and advocated the outsourcing process should stop and other options should be reconsidered.

They also suggested that the model of involving head teachers in the management of the authority was showing signs of making a positive impact and the 'interim approach' should continue.

All key players in Bradford, including the school leaders felt it was in the best interests of the children to continue the outsourcing process. T.S Elliot once said "Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far it is possible to go." We were about to find out.