

## **PFI ghost story (Private Eye 30 November 2018)**

**WITH no academy chain willing to take it on, struggling South Shields School faces joining the ranks of the ghost schools - empty buildings for which local education authorities pay millions of pounds each year in ruinous private finance initiative (PFI) contracts.**

The £23m South Shields School project was part of the Building Schools for the Future scheme (*Eyes passim*). It was ordered to convert to an academy last year after earning a poor Ofsted rating - even though inspectors reported that new leadership was already starting to resolve many of the school's problems. This summer the school scored its best ever OCSE results but to no avail: the order remains in place - convert or close.

The regional schools commissioner (RSC), however, has been unable to find any multi-academy trust (MAT) willing to take over the school, where pupil numbers are shrinking due to local demographics. The nearest other secondary schools also have significant surplus places.

Fewer pupils mean less money coming in each year, but the annual cost of the PFI deal remains the same, making the school an unappealing prospect for a trust. The young people of South Shields still need a school to go to and the teachers and headteacher are campaigning to keep the school open. A decision on closure is due in January. If it does shut, South Tyneside council will have to meet the £409,000 annual cost of the ghost school for the next 19 years. It can only use the building for educational purposes.

The most famous ghost school is Parklands High in Liverpool, empty since 2014 yet costing taxpayers £12,000 a day. It was highlighted by MPs on the public accounts committee this summer as an example of the lack of flexibility in PFI deals. It is not the only one. Kingsway Academy in Wirral was closed this summer by the Northern Schools Trust, with the PFI bill falling on the local council; and Hameldon Community College in Burnley is also due to close in 2019, with 14 years still to run on the PFI contract for its new buildings. Local MP Julie Cooper pointed out that the school would have had sustainable numbers if it wasn't for the opening of a rival free school, which undermined local education planning in Burnley.