

## All-Party Parliamentary Group on Education Governance and Leadership

Reference was made in the Summer Newsletter to the existence of this group, henceforth referred to as the APPG, which is Chaired by Neil Carmichael MP (who is the Member of Parliament for Stroud in Gloucestershire).

On Monday December 10<sup>th</sup> the APPG held a meeting in Portcullis House (next to the Houses of Parliament) to which I and Jim Conway, our Vice-Chair, were invited. The purpose was to enable discussion on changes to be made to schools' funding as from April 2013. This did enable us to put forward issues as they impacted upon Dudley – these were noted and it may be that our representation will have led to changes being made – even if these changes are quite minor then it could have a positive benefit for Dudley schools.

The most significant issue for us was the “lump sum” which forms a component in the calculation of the schools block funding (part of the DSG, the Dedicated Schools Grant). The plans for April involve every school within an Authority receiving exactly the same lump sum, irrespective of the size of the school although different Authorities might set different values for this. We recognise already, as do most Authorities, that the costs of running a small school are disproportionately higher than those involved in the running of a large school; in consequence we have always included a “small school supplement” applicable to small schools only to assist in ‘balancing the books’. We believe that this is the correct approach both for Dudley and certainly it is as true for rural authorities such as Devon which has schools with as few as 20 or 30 children in them – *and we think that we have a small school issue !!!* Making this lump sum the same for all schools does nothing to help overcome this imbalance and actually reduces the size of the AWPU, the “per-student” figure and also worsens the funding of schools in areas of deprivation.

We therefore expressed our concern over this change, suggesting that the application of such a lump sum should be discretionary or that it should be based upon a “small school supplement” approach as we do at present. The Chair noted these suggestions.

A second issue for us was around the lack of guidance on funding for Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) – the only DfE statement to date was that “PRUs will have delegated budgets” but there has as yet (after twelve months) been no fuller guidance given concerning the calculation of these budgets – we need to get positive guidance on this in order to set up our Authority budget calculations for the next year. Significantly the Authority is regularly receiving calls from staff at the DfE seeking our assistance rather than the other way round – this is worrying even if we might feel pleased that we should be viewed as being sufficiently well-informed and fair in our funding approaches to warrant being thus viewed.

The calculations for the High Needs block, which encompasses Special Schools, PRUs etc also requires far more guidance from DfE than currently exists. For instance in the banded framework for calculating what one Authority must pay another when a child with extreme SEN needs has to be educated outside the Borough, Dudley works on a framework with eleven bandings whilst our neighbour Birmingham has one with only four bandings. The DfE must speed up the provision of guidance so that the costs for providing such educational needs are the same whether in Dudley or in Walsall or elsewhere.

The intention is to move to a National Funding Formula (NFF) by 2015/16 and if this can be achieved it should help to reduce the current imbalance in funding which has meant that some

of the 150 authorities nationally appear to be dramatically better funded than do others. The F40 group (representatives of the 40 worst funded authorities in the country) were very evident at the meeting. It should be noted that Dudley lies roughly at the upper boundary of this funding model although some years ago it languished at the very bottom. Significantly it was Dudley's lowly position in such a table of authorities which led to the formation of DAGB in the first place. Nearly 20 years ago our representatives met with the then-Secretary of State for Education to bid for better funding for the Borough. Although we are further up the table now (*doubtless helped by the DAGB delegation's activities*) the difference between ourselves and the current lowest-funded authority is not really that great.

We all realize that funding for schools, already experiencing tough times, is going to be a real headache for the next few years. The best we can hope for is that the nationally imposed system is as fair as it can be. DAGB will continue to press for this to be achieved, not only by its work with the APPG but also through direct representation to our local MPs and others.

*Brian Patterson*

*Chair, DAGB*