

Association News – Easter 2013

By the time that this is in members' hands it is to be hoped that Spring will be in full swing – but at the time of writing there is still a sprinkling of snow everywhere and day-time temperatures are fluctuating wildly, from 15 degrees C down to – 2 degrees C within a matter of days.

Olympics Legacy

We reported in the last issue about concerns about the opportunities for young people to take part in physical activities in growing numbers in the wake of the Olympics and the Paralympics. We have now received a significant number of responses to our investigations, including one from Hugh Robertson MP, the Minister for Sport, although it is proving difficult to separate fact from political hyperbole. On the one hand we have letters and other statements which tell us in glowing detail just what is being done to support and to encourage the development of sporting activities amongst the young (in particular) and we also have reports which paint a far less rosy picture. No prizes for guessing which sides of the political divide have provided the two sources of conflicting comment !!!

We have however challenged both to come up with figures which confirm their claims – is the money we are assured is being spent actually “new” money or is it simply being re-circulated? Ideally we could do with data which can show how the total spent nationally in this field has changed year on year – unfortunately as the titles for the various elements of funding change year-on-year – new ones come and old ones go – the playing field for comparison simply refuses to stay level. It should, of course, be noted that the Government abolished the School Sport Partnerships in 2010 so saving £162 million which had previously been used for the promotion of sporting activities. We are pushing for the development of an infrastructure which serves to promote and develop physical activity both locally and nationally and also to devise metrics which can unambiguously measure the extent to which it is being achieved.

However we are now able to report that our efforts have brought a small measure of success in the (very) recent announcement that new funding of £150 million per annum for the next two years is to be made available directly to primary schools, ring-fenced, for school sport and PE. The Prime Minister is reported as saying “We can create a culture in our schools that encourages all children to be active and enjoy sport” – the announcement also includes the following statement “ comes after widespread calls for more investment in school sport to help build on the legacy potential of the 2012 Games”. We are pleased to record that we were amongst those who made such calls and that we continue to do so – it would be totally naive to think that we, and we alone, were responsible for this success, but, as so often is the case, we contribute to the cause both often and regularly and such contributions do influence those who are anxious for our votes. This particular funding is restricted to primary schools so we will continue to press

for the Secondary sector to receive more support and to ensure that Special schools are fully included, whilst not ignoring other primary school needs. We will also seek to extend the two year funding into future years.

“Healthy Lifestyle” Competition

Shortly before the February Half-Term all schools received notification of the fourth annual competition, the objective this time being the creation of healthy recipes. Whilst there is no point in reiterating all the details here, we are expecting to produce a booklet containing the best 18 entries (nine from Primary and nine from Secondary – Special Schools are of course included and their entries will be identified within their relevant age category), suitably illustrated, during the Summer.

None of this would be possible without the full support of the Healthy Schools Public Health Programme and the active encouragement of Jill Edwards, Manager of the Healthy Schools unit and her team. The presentation evening for the award of prizes for the competition is scheduled for Thursday June 27th and we are expecting that a “mystery guest” will be there to present the awards. As “they” say – ‘Watch this space’.

“GCSE and EBacc”

It will have been noted already that Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, has changed his mind about getting rid of GCSEs and their replacement (substantially) by the English Baccalaureate – all that we really know beyond this is that he wants to see them more rigorously examined and that he proposes to include structural changes to both them and to “A” levels. We hope to be able to report further on these issues later as more clarity is reached.

Horse DNA

Earlier in the year the headlines of the press were dominated by the discovery that some meat products available in supermarkets contained traces of contamination by horse meat. Whilst in several European countries horse meat is regularly eaten and is not perceived as any threat to health, its presence is clear evidence that inadequate care is being taken in some quarters to ensure that the contents of foodstuffs available within the U.K. reflects exactly the labelling on those products so that, to paraphrase a slogan, “It contains exactly what it says on the tin”.

Concern deepened in educational circles when two local authorities (in Perthshire and Pembrokeshire) revealed that meat being served in schools contained evidence of horse DNA. These instances prompted us to investigate the situation in Dudley and we received the following assurance

“1. Re local authority procurement of meat products; Dudley uses a supplier of fresh meat (Midland Foods). The supplier is able to trace the source of all its products back to UK farms

and has never sourced or sold equine meat. Evidence of DNA testing to rule out the presence of horsemeat is also available.

2. Some schools procure their own meat products as they have opted out of the local authority catering service. In these cases it is the responsibility of the school to exercise due diligence.”

We have also seen a copy of the laboratory report dated February 19th which clearly confirms the complete absence of horse DNA in the supplier’s products. This is excellent news in the light of what has been found elsewhere and says much for the Authority’s policy of using fresh rather than frozen meat, unlike some of our neighbouring councils. This should set colleagues’ minds at rest but we would urge those from schools which have opted out of the authority catering service to obtain similar assurances.

School Places

A recent report (March 2013) on ‘Capital Funding for New School Places’ by the National Audit Office has raised doubts about the ability of the country nationally to provide sufficient school places for children in the wake of an increased birth rate. It is estimated that some 256,000 extra school places will be required by 2014 whereas an increase of only one third of that number of places has been made available nationally during the course of the past few years.

Because of a falling birth rate at the start of the last decade the number of places available in primary schools was reduced by 5% between 2004 and 2010. However the number of live births had risen by 22% between 2001 and 2011.

There is no reason currently to be concerned locally about this situation – Dudley has monitored the number of live births (which itself gives some five years warning of the need for more primary places) regularly but there are some factors which make matching the supply with the demand quite difficult. Even within the Borough the actual birth rate varies by Township just as Dudley’s does when compared against other authorities around the country, which means that planning places has to reflect this. Over a longer period of time migration from one district to another (such as moving out from Town centres into green belt housing developments) also impacts upon the local need for school places.

The changes to funding schools over the past year or two has further impacted upon the ability to improve upon this availability of places, as has the loss of the Building Schools for the Future programme. We will investigate the local situation in greater depth and report back to governors in due course.

Annual General Meeting

On Thursday July 4th we will be holding our A.G.M. at Saltwells E.D.C. commencing at 7.00 pm. We really would like to see as many of our governor members as possible at this event

since it is one occasion when we get the best opportunity to hear from many people their views on what is happening in the ever-changing world of education, and especially their concerns. As an organisation we can, and will, do our best to represent the interests of our members, both locally and nationally and we will not be swayed by political bias, working only in the best interests of the children in our schools as well as of those who support them, as school staff or as governors.

Brian Patterson

Chair, DAGB