

News From The Association

By the time that members get the opportunity to read these notes, Christmas 2011 and New Year 2012 will probably be well past, but at the time of writing they are still very much “future events”. We have just had one of the warmest Octobers on record and it has already been indicated that November looks like being the warmest for getting on for 400 years; yet a year ago we had the coldest December for hundreds of years. Whilst these observations might well be more appropriate in a Meteorological Office report they bear an uncanny similarity to much that has been happening in the field of education. We are confronted by a surfeit of extremes and a considerable measure of unpredictability.

Meetings with MPs.

During this term we have had two more meetings with local Members of Parliament, Margot James (Stourbridge) and Ian Austin (Dudley North) in their respective constituencies. In both cases there was no let-up on questions for them to answer and both meetings not only ran their full course but could easily have continued for more than the two hours which had been allocated. Topics for discussion were varied. At the meeting with Ian Austin these included the difficulties in schools obtaining the full amount of Pupil Premium to which they were entitled, problems of funding for Children’s Centres, the continued development of extended schools and the whole issue of community cohesion. Unsurprisingly, Building Schools for Future was discussed, as were academies and University Technical Colleges (UTCs). Cyber-bullying and other issues concerned with discipline in schools evoked heated concern and the plethora of premises’ inspections (largely health and safety based) which impacted so adversely upon school budgets also figured in discussions.

At the meeting with Margot James some of the earlier issues were revisited but others emerged. Standards in education (reducing or improving?) was one which concerned governors and Margot confirmed her own concern. Such was the potential for confusion (especially in the minds of parents) with the welter of different types of school such as (old) academies, (new) academies, studio schools, free schools, UTCs, grammar, federations etc it was clear that this needed resolution, some sort of road map being a starting-point; there could well be a growing problem with admissions to these schools, especially with so many being their own admissions authorities. Reference was also made to the worrying possibility that a Governing Body decision might become the subject of a judicial review.

All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education Governance and Leadership.

Members will be interested to learn that this group has been set up recently at Westminster in order to raise the profile of school and college governors, to explore their changing leadership role, to act as advocates for the importance of good school and college governance, and to ensure that governors’ views and concerns are heard in Parliament. The NGA is acting as the Secretariat for the group which is chaired by Neil Carmichael, MP for Stroud in Gloucestershire. The inaugural meeting took place on November 21st in Portcullis House, adjacent to the Palace of Westminster, and, although it is not possible as yet to provide full details, other than to indicate that those present were very supportive of the work of school (and college) governors, there is every likelihood that this group will continue to meet. We do have representation on the group, having arranged previously for our local MPs to be included in the invitations. One of the most important aspects of the existence of such a Group is that it raises governors’ profile and we are therefore delighted to be involved.

University Technical Colleges

At one of the MP meetings earlier in this term specific reference was made to University Technical Colleges (UTCs) and to the question as to why Dudley had not (apparently) applied for one to be created in the Borough. It is appropriate therefore that we clarify what a UTC actually is, especially as they were introduced alongside Free Schools, (new) Academies, Studio Schools and Technical Academies by the new Government in 2010.

A UTC caters for young people aged 14 to 19 and provides a curriculum specializing in subjects which require modern, industry-specific equipment such as those used in manufacturing and engineering companies. Students are taught technical skills alongside business skills and the use of ICT, so that there is an integration of academic study with practical learning. The curriculum and the ethos of a UTC are designed in conjunction with local and national employers and work experience represents a necessary component of the training programme. Subjects offered include GCSEs in English, Mathematics, a Science, a Modern Foreign Language and a Humanity (it is no coincidence that these are the constituent parts of the English Baccalaureate) together with relevant technical qualifications. The UTC may have two “specialisms” which are likely to reflect the needs of local industry. A University will always be involved and will lead or be involved in the governance of the UTC in order to give credibility. However an existing (traditional) FE College may also be involved as a co-sponsor.

The Government’s target is the creation of 24 UTCs by 2014, although the first two are quite local. The JCB Academy (all UTCs are classified as Academies) was opened in Staffordshire in 2010 and the Black Country UTC in Walsall in 2011.

Upon completion of their training at a UTC, students would be able to either undertake a High Level Apprenticeship or go on to University.

For students the expectation is that they will work the same sort of hours they might be expected to undertake in regular employment, typically from 8.30 am to 5.30 pm but there would be no traditional homework set as such since it is expected that all necessary study will fit in within those hours. Existing schools cannot simply convert to become UTCs, unlike the model of (ordinary) academies, so UTCs have to be created ‘from scratch’.

Other Activities

The Association is currently acting on a number of issues raised by members and the outcomes of these will be announced as and when they come to fruition. Meanwhile we are still pursuing the Premises Check-List (with its long list of more than one hundred “health-and-safety” type inspections) and are aware that this is due for publication very shortly. We are however delighted to announce that the Healthy Lifestyle competitions will be taking place again this year following the continued support from the Healthy Schools team at the local Primary Care Trust. Full details of this will be sent out to all schools after Christmas but the general picture appears to be “bigger and better”.

Elsewhere in this Newsletter are outline details of the meetings to be held in the first part of 2012 and I look forward to meeting as many of you as possible at one or more of those events.

Brian Patterson
Chair, DAGB