

**DUDLEY ASSOCIATION OF GOVERNING BODIES MEETING**  
**WITH JAMES MORRIS MP FOR HALESOWEN AND ROWLEY REGIS**  
**HELD ON 13<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2011 7.00PM**  
**AT HALESBURY SPECIAL SCHOOL, HALESOWEN**

Welcome and Introduction

Brian Patterson, Chair of Dudley Association of Governing Bodies (DAGB) in opening the meeting, thanked James Morris MP for coming and welcomed governors from both Halesowen (Dudley) and Rowley Regis (Sandwell). The Association of Sandwell Governing Bodies (ASGB) was also represented. Brian highlighted the fact that the Halesowen and Rowley Regis ward spanned two Local Authorities, making life a little more complicated for Mr Morris.

Prior to his election one year ago, Mr Morris, together with the other Dudley MPs was asked for a statement to indicate what his party would do, if elected to Westminster, for education in the borough. These statements were (and are) available on the DAGB website ([www.dagb.org.uk](http://www.dagb.org.uk)) and Mr Patterson suggested that they might form an interesting basis for on-going discussion.

Governors were urged to try and set their own personal political affiliations aside for the purpose of the meeting and to simply regard Mr Morris as our 'representative at Westminster'.

Mr Morris had attended to discuss issues and respond to governors' questions. It was agreed that if he was unable to provide an immediate response, his comments would be e-mailed to delegates and also put on the DAGB web site together with the notes from the meeting.

Pupil Premium

Mr Patterson confirmed that Pupil Premium would be based on Free School Meals (FSM) entitlement and there was a general concern from governors that this would result in a mis-match between those who actually claimed FSM and those entitled to claim but did not.

A short discussion about the reasons why parents did not claim FSM (thought to be cultural/social) took place and Mr Morris was asked to comment on whether there was an alternative mechanism that might be applied to ensure that disadvantaged children did not miss out.

Mr Morris summarised the ethos of the Pupil Premium and acknowledged the reasons why it might not reach those who most needed it for the reasons discussed. He accepted that it was difficult to see what more could be done to encourage those eligible to claim and was interested to know whether governors themselves had any ideas.

Governors suggested that there should be more focus on Pupil Premium in its own right, rather than Pupil Premium being seen as almost a 'spin-off' of FSM with the attached perceived stigma. The purpose and benefits of Pupil Premium (additional funding for the school) could perhaps be better conveyed to parents (by being packaged and promoted without reference to FSM).

Mr Morris was pleased that the Pupil Premium seemed to be well received by this group of governors. He assured them that the effectiveness of the scheme would be reviewed and although spending was based on a two year horizon, his expectation would be that it would be continued.

Finally, Mr Patterson stressed that these meetings were a two way process and so governors were encouraged to feedback their ideas – governors can and do influence the future of education.

### SEN

A governor asked about the impact of cuts on Speech and Language Services. They felt that this service was already under resourced and gave as an example the time allocated to Halesbury School itself.

Mr Morris advised that NHS funding had been increased in 'real terms'; that more money was to be directed to the NHS over the next four years. However, there was a drive on efficiency and there had been changes to the PCT. The Health and Social Care Bill had been paused. Mr Morris was unable to answer the specific question and agreed to come back on that point.

Mr Morris referred governors to the Green Paper on Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Disability. The involvement of multiple agencies made it very difficult for parents to get the help they needed and, therefore, the purpose of the Bill was to simplify the process and give more control to families.

A governor commented that it might be more effective to sort out the problems with the agencies themselves as parents would still be dealing with these same agencies at some point. Communication between agencies was said to be 'abysmal' in some cases and it was suggested that parents should have control of their own SEN funding to ensure that best use was made of it. Timing was an issue; governors stated that, currently, children could suffer because of the time it takes to put the appropriate support in place.

Governors also thought that parents of SEN children might not always recognise problems themselves and therefore the support process needed to allow other professionals an opportunity to instigate the initial application for support.

Mr Morris responded that the expectation was for boundaries between agencies to be ‘collapsed’ and processes to be streamlined. The ‘point of entry’ into the system was crucial and the Bill would ensure that from that simplified point, any problems would be resolved by the *system* rather than the parents.

*(The Closing date for the current SEN consultation is 30<sup>th</sup> June 2011 – reference to be found at [www.education.gov.uk/consultation](http://www.education.gov.uk/consultation))*

### Ofsted/School Inspections

Governors expressed their views on Ofsted inspections. There was a feeling that some Ofsted Inspectors were guilty of making judgements without having the necessary training to do so (for instance about SEN issues). They questioned exactly what level of training Lead Educationists would be required to have and shared their concern that these professionals would have no relationship or link with either Ofsted or the Local Authority. Mr Morris agreed on the need for appropriate training for both School Inspectors and Lead Educationists.

### The role of Local Authorities

Mr Patterson picked up on the reference to Local Authorities and suggested that there was a feeling that the Government was trying to ‘get rid of Local Authorities’. Mr Morris responded that the education reforms did necessitate a different role for Local Authorities. It was envisaged that they would be more strategic and that their ‘role and shape would change radically’.

Siddique Hussain introduced himself as the West Midlands Regional Director of the National Governors Association (NGA) (*Brian Patterson being the Assistant Regional Director*) and stated that the NGA supported the Government’s proposal that Chairs of governors should attend training for the role.

Mr Hussain had concerns however, about the impact of the Governments ‘push’ for schools to become Trusts and Academies. His concern was for the schools left *within* Local Authority control but with reduced funding which would inevitably affect the services they could provide. School Improvement Partners were cited as an example – without their support, a school’s performance could potentially decline, impacting on the children, the school itself and with knock on consequences for the whole community.

There was also a real concern that a ‘two tier’ system of schools would evolve, an idea repudiated by Mr. Morris. He responded that Local Authorities would remain responsible for the provision of services during any transition periods. There was indeed a drive towards Academy status, but Mr Morris stressed that schools would not have changes imposed upon them, unless they were ‘failing’ schools. There were many reasons why a school might be regarded as ‘failing’ but whatever the reason, standards needed to be raised and working in

partnership with other schools could help. There were examples of this strategy working in both Sandwell and Dudley.

Existing Academies were encouraged to support low attaining schools and the development of partnerships was also advocated. Governors acknowledged Mr Morris' comments but stressed that the improvement from such ideas could take at least two or three years and those years are lost to the children whose education suffers during that time.

Governors also challenged the idea that Academy support would be more successful than support from the LA. They made the point that Academies, in line with all schools, would still need various services, if not from the LA, then from another provider. There was a suggestion however, that if the LA had to compete with other providers, they would be obliged to become more efficient and effective.

Mr Morris did envisage that eventually all schools would become Academies.

### Examinations

A governor quoted data from the Mary Warnock report (1978), which, although thirty years old, still held true – the data referred to the percentages of children in school who needed SEN provision or some sort of support to achieve. She felt that teachers themselves needed support and that the ethos in all schools should be more positive. Also that there should be an acceptance that not all children will achieve 5 A\* to C grade GCSEs.

A governor stated her view that it was unfair to judge Special Schools by the same criteria used in other schools - it was felt that more appropriate targets should be set.

There was a general feeling from governors that not enough time is allowed to see the result of changes in education before they are abandoned and further changes imposed. Far greater stability is needed!

A detailed discussion about the merits of GCSEs versus vocational education followed. It was agreed that all children, no matter where they lived or what their social background, should leave school with a good standard of English and Maths. Deprivation should not be used as an excuse not to drive up standards. A governor recounted his own experience in industry wherein businesses had been obliged to provide remedial training in Maths, English and customer awareness/communication skills to a high proportion of their new recruits.

Mr Morris agreed with governors that vocational qualifications were of equal importance – not all young people were the same and it was unfair for society to apportion more weight to academic qualifications, as seemed to be the case. He saw the past lack of vocational training as a major failing and that it should be a viable alternative for young people.

Governors considered that League Tables were a major part of the problem, in that they focused on English and maths to the detriment of all other subjects.

A governor expressed concern that schools could manipulate the tables by putting able children in for the tests twice to boost results over two years. Mr Morris agreed that this was the 'downside' of targets but that parents needed some criteria by which to judge their children's progress. Mr Patterson gave an example of a school that had dramatically 'massaged' the League Tables.

In response, a governor suggested that the use of Key Performance Indicators (KPI) used in industry might be more appropriate as they encouraged improved standards across a business rather than focused on the competition element.

### Further Education

A governor challenged Mr Morris about the 'unfair playing field' for 18-24 Apprenticeships. Employers offering apprenticeships for under 19 year olds could reclaim all the training costs but this reduced to only 50% for over 19 year olds.

Mr Morris responded that the Government were 'pushing apprenticeships hard' and they needed more businesses to be involved. Apprenticeships needed to be high quality and match supply with demand in the job market. The challenge was to compete with the rest of the world.

This prompted some discussion about the apprenticeships offered in the past and many governors shared their own experiences in this respect. Governors also alluded to the decline of industry in the area and Mr Morris commented that the service industry was becoming more prevalent and we therefore need to 'up-skill' to meet that challenge. Home working was another aspect of the job market that deserved consideration and the curriculum needed to encourage a more entrepreneurial spirit and greater aspirations.

### Governor Responsibilities

Mr Morris was asked to comment upon the huge amount of work and the responsibility now imposed upon governors. He could empathise as he had been a governor in two challenging schools and appreciated the commitment made by governors.

A short discussion followed during which FMSiS was submitted as an example of the complicated bureaucracy in school governance.

Mr Patterson stated that he was surprised that governance had not been included in the remit of the National College since governors formed a significant component of the leadership team in every school and he enquired whether it was envisaged that there would also be training offered for all governors, not just for Chairs.

A governor shared a concern that schools did not always follow governor advice in respect of Health and Safety and there was a general acknowledgement that the number of separate Health and Safety inspections required in schools was both excessive and costly, especially for smaller schools. At the request of the DAGB, Dudley MBC was to publish a list of these inspections and their associated costs. Mr Morris was asked to raise this on our behalf but in the meantime, governors should be sharing their knowledge and skills both within the borough and with their colleagues from neighbouring authorities.

### Other Issues

A governor asked about the impact of budget cuts on After Schools Clubs. She felt that schools premises should be made use of and reasonably priced childcare was needed for both young and older children especially as there was a drive to get people back to work. Mr Morris agreed to come back to DAGB on this point.

Equal Pay and Single Status impacts were briefly discussed. Special schools in Dudley and elsewhere had been hard hit due to the number of support staff employed. Whilst it was acknowledged that this was a local issue, Mr Morris requested more information to see if anything could be done.

University Fees were discussed, touching on the type of courses offered, the length of the course and the other options available such as part time courses and vocational qualifications. Mr Morris agreed that English tax payers should not be subsidizing the Scotland universities (where top-up fees were not charged) and stated that this 'needed to be addressed'.

### Conclusion

Mr Morris told governors that he had found the meeting most useful and hoped that such meetings would take place on a regular basis. He looked forward to receiving the notes from the meeting and promised to respond on any outstanding issues.

Mr Patterson thanked Mr Morris for his time, acknowledging the difficulties of balancing his MP duties both here and in Westminster and the impact on his family life. It had been a valuable opportunity to share the feelings and concerns of governors in Halesowen and Rowley with Mr Morris and for him in turn, to take these back to Westminster. He further thanked all those attending for their questions and support and the school for providing the venue and refreshments.

Mr Hussain thanked Mr Patterson for organising the meeting and for inviting governors from Rowley Regis.

The meeting ended at 9.00pm

*(Subsequently James Morris wrote to respond to two points – on speech and language services and on after school clubs – which had arisen during the course of the meeting. His responses appear – verbatim – below)*

***“A governor asked about the impact of cuts on Speech and Language Services. They felt that this service was already under resourced and gave as an example the time allocated to Halesbury School itself (p.2)***

*Reductions in spending by Dudley Council on Children’s Services are being made: however, these are mainly on areas such as management and administration, rather than on education services. Some reductions are also occurring in respect of spending on children with disabilities and from the School Support budget. These decisions were made by Dudley Council, who of course is faced with making difficult spending decisions, due to the nature of the economy which the previous government left. The effects of these decisions are unclear without speaking specifically to individual schools.*

*However, Dudley NHS Community Services are also involved in running speech and language services, and they have seen numerous budget increases in recent years. Indeed, since 2002/3, they have averaged a funding increase of 9% per year. They spend around £7m on children, young people and families, and a further £10.5m on long term conditions. Although they have to make efficiency savings, they intend to reshape and refocus the way in which services are delivered to achieve this, rather than simply making cutbacks.*

***A governor asked about the impact of budget cuts on After School Clubs. She felt that school premises should be made use of and reasonably priced childcare was needed for both young and older children especially as there was a drive to get people back to work (p.6)***

*Of course, the Government wants to do all it can to encourage parents and indeed those able to work, back into full or part time employment. For instance, the Department for Work and Pensions provide services such as 15 hours per week of free childcare for children aged 3 to 4. DWP also assist lone parents, by allowing them to claim Income Support until their youngest child is 7. They then continue to support lone parents by allowing them to only work schools hours up until their children reach the age of 12.*

*The financial implications for after school clubs are not clear as yet, and it might be helpful to speak to individual schools. However, this could be an opportunity to remodel the way in which after school clubs are run. For instance, schools could seek to work with the voluntary sector to provide after school facilities for young people, utilising school premises in doing so. It is important that schools look to be innovative, and take this opportunity to provide modern and flexible services for parents.”*