

# **Report on the January 2007 Conference of the National**

## **Governors' Association held on**

**Saturday, 27<sup>th</sup> January 2007**

**at the**

## **Birmingham Council Chamber**

The conference opened with a welcome from the Chair, Judith Bennett. She introduced some of the guests. Professor Peter Matthews, Institute of Education, London University, was attending in order to seek governors' views on the training courses *Taking the Chair* and *Leading Together*, which he and colleagues had been commissioned to evaluate on behalf of the DfES. Ros Asher and Malcolm Dodds from Partnerships for Schools (PFS) were running a workshop on Building Schools for the Future later in the day.

The Chair commented on the continuing progress of NGA. February 15<sup>th</sup> would mark the first anniversary of the new organisation. The first year had seen healthy progress; with many new partners approaching NGA to talk and to work with us, and NGA's profile had increased.

Turning to the day's programme, the speakers' themes and the workshops were current and relevant and illustrated NGA's working relationships with some of its partners – NCSL, FSA and PFS.

The first speaker, Geoff Southworth, Deputy Chief Executive of the National College of School Leadership (NCSL) examined the difficulty in recruiting headteachers, notably for small schools, some faith schools and in London, and the demographic 'time bomb' in 2009–11 when so many heads were expected to retire. As many would know from experience often teachers dismissed the idea of headship as it was seen as burdensome and unrewarding. Too often current heads gave a negative picture of their experience rather than sharing the positives, such as 'making a difference' to children and their education. Heads, like the British in general, had a culture of 'dampened enthusiasm' and there was a real need to abandon this.

There were not enough teachers in the 'usual' age profile of late 30s and 40s to fill these posts. The solution could perhaps be found in such structural arrangements as federations, but, in many ways, the best solution lay in encouraging teachers at a younger age, and earlier in their careers, to aspire to headship. Governors were key to changing the approach schools would need. Schools needed to nurture talent and grow new leaders by giving younger teachers the opportunity to take on management responsibilities and leadership roles. We needed to identify talent and work towards succession planning. Geoff suggested that local solutions should be adopted, where a group of schools exchanged teachers to promote wider experience. It was also essential that schools – heads and governors – were 'generous' and embraced the idea of growing leaders in the knowledge that they were being fostered often for the benefit of others. It must be a co-operative and reciprocal effort. Several pilots were being carried out to explore new approaches. NCSL had worked with NGA to organise five regional conferences for governors in the later spring/early summer so that governors could learn more and come together to share the planning necessary for the future if the problems of attracting enough head teachers was to be addressed successfully.

Delegates asked questions about finding school leaders from outside teaching, the retention of young teachers and the issue of the NPQH course including very little about the powers and responsibilities of

governing bodies and working with governors. Geoff drew attention to the re-design of NPQH, in which NGA was a key stakeholder. The aim was to remedy this in the new course.

After the morning break the conference was addressed by the Minister for Schools, Jim Knight MP. The Chair pointed out that the phone call from Jim Knight's office two weeks previously to say that the Minister would like to join NGA at today's event had 'transformed her day' (*much laughter!*)

Jim Knight paid tribute to governors, describing them as 'too often neglected' and 'unsung heroes'. He advocated better recognition of governors and hoped that something had been done about this by the introduction of the Governor of the Year in the Teaching Awards and the inclusion in the New Year's Honours List of several governors, including Neil Davies, Chair of NGC.

Schools and governors were being given new freedoms to make changes – with fewer targets; testing pupils when they were ready rather than at set times; and the opportunity to adopt Trust status and cement relationships with business partners. There was much for schools and governors to address: Extended Services; more accountability to parents and a stronger voice for parents; the need to encourage more parental involvement in their children's education; personalised learning; and new models of school leadership.

Some of the audience however were querying metaphorically – “why has a government minister finally turned up and what does it mean?” Hopefully the government was recognising fully the NGA, the new single voice of the largest volunteer force in the country.

However some governors were worried that the Minister's speech came a couple of weeks after the publication of a government commissioned study on school leadership (a question about this report was asked at the DAGB Governor Advisory Group in November) by the consultancy Price Waterhouse Cooper (PWC) – (see publications section [teachernet.gov.uk](http://teachernet.gov.uk))

The report's suggestion that those non-teachers, such as business people, could become headteachers snatched the headlines, but it also contained several sections of the role and effectiveness of governors, which makes challenging reading for governors.

The report stated “a number of key aspects of school governance needs to be reformed. One fifth of headteachers in both primary and secondary schools described the governance arrangements in their own schools as 'very ineffective' or 'quite ineffective'.”

The report went on to say that the DfES should examine several issues including the size and composition of governing bodies, the implications of the Every Child Matters Agenda, Extended Schools and how to organise the governance of Federated Schools. “A particular issue ..... is the need to balance the representative role that governors fulfil on behalf of their communities and parent bodies, and the extent to which that brings professional skills and expertise that can support school leaders.”

But none of this from Jim Knight? - just – How wonderful we all were?

However the question remains; was his speech written before or after the PWC report?

Or, if it was written before, why wasn't the study mentioned?

What are the implications, real or apparent, for schools and governing bodies?

Questions to the Minister followed. He was thanked for his compliments to governors and asked that the DfES should agree to compulsory induction training for governors. (Previous Schools Ministers had

replied that as volunteers it was not possible to make this stipulation. Jim Knight at least replied that he would look into it!)

Other questions covered:

- community cohesion and faith schools – the Minister wryly referred to the Government’s recent U-turn on faith schools;
- Trust status and the move from the stakeholder model and local democratic practice – we were told that so far few governing bodies were opting for the model where the Trust appointed the majority of the governors;
- the need for governors to be supported by advice and funding in situations where the governing body was confronted by the possibility of a judicial review, and a crippling burden on the school budget – the LA should provide support and deal with such situations;
- the burden of FMSIS – secondary schools seemed to be managing this; small primaries should work together and share bursars; forming federations may be an answer;
- (also from the same questioner) freedom, about which the Minister had been speaking, came with sufficient money: there was a need to make funding realistic to cover the agenda schools must address and a need for proportionality – Funding was, of course, dependent on the Comprehensive Spending Review. Having a Dorset constituency, the Minister did understand this issue; the picture had improved nationally, but more was being asked of schools in exchange. JK had asked officials in the Schools Directorate to map out what was being demanded of schools in September ’06, ’07 and ’08 so that he could see the demands and look towards the possibility of lessening these demands;
- models of governance and academies: would the Minister reflect on appointments versus elections and comment on the thesis that elected governors provided better scrutiny than those appointed by the sponsor of an academy? – there was a need to choose the best model for new circumstances, such as extended schools; ‘elected governors were good for accountability but appointed governors (with business skills?) might be better for scrutiny’.
- DAGB members Brian Patterson and Jim Conway questioned the Minister on school place planning in the Borough of Dudley and the implications of concomitant expansion and contraction locally and nationally.

The last speaker of the morning was Jamie Blackshaw, Senior Scientific Officer, Food Standards Agency. He spoke about the responsibilities of the governing body for food standards; the relevance of these to most of the Every Child Matters agenda’s Five Outcomes; and the additional responsibility – for all school food – placed upon governors in the Education and Inspections Act 2006. The FSA had worked with the NGA for a number of years and NGA had produced a publication *Food Policy in Schools – A Strategic Policy Framework for Governing Bodies*. This had been revised in the light of the new Act and would be published soon.

The first part of the afternoon was devoted to four workshops/discussion groups covering Models of Governance, Building Schools for the Future, Sustainable Schools and Supporting Governors through Mentoring. The four groups addressed issues very relevant to schools and their future structure and activities – and to governing bodies and their future structure and practice.

The final part of the day was a plenary discussion. Various issues were raised, including:

- Schools Forums: these were still causing concern in some areas and not every LA recognised the powers which should rest with the forum; there were still forums with insufficient governor

representation;

- Performance Management: the guidance and model policies were not to be available until April, which was too late with implementation set for September;
- Working governors: daytime meetings were an issue – there was difficulty in being granted time off for governance duties;
- Thanks were offered by a delegate new to NGA events for a successful and enjoyable day.

The Chair closed the conference by thanking exhibitors, workshop leaders and speakers for their time and their contribution; Jean McEntire, CEO of NGA, Gillian Windass, Policy Officer, and the office staff for their work in organising the conference; and delegates for giving up a Saturday and for their valuable contributions to the day.