

## National Governors' Association Conference 2009

For the first time ever the NGA held its annual Conference and Annual General Meeting outside London, in the imposing interior of Birmingham's Council House in November 2009. The theme of the Conference was "Intelligent Accountability"..

The first speaker of the day was the NGA President, Baroness Howe of Idlicote. Lady Howe spoke first about parliamentarians in the light of the amount of media coverage they had received in recent months and then about the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning (ASCL) Bill. Regarding Parliament, she reminded us that the two Chambers were very different, not least because one had salaried members and in the other members received allowances. Lady Howe had been one of the first tranche of crossbench, independent peers, chosen by a committee. The range of experience and expertise in the Lords, to which these peers added, was tremendous. In the past the Commons had been filled mainly by people who had had others jobs, professions and experience in many fields. Now, she said, most were researchers or communicators but had had little experience of the wider world. This change had had its impact. The House of Lords, by a 'typical British accident' represented all sorts of backgrounds, and great experience. It was also fairly equally split in terms of political party representation. The Lords spent 60% of its time reviewing and revising legislation, and a huge number of the changes recommended were adopted by the Government. In terms of costs per head, the Commons cost the taxpayer £600,000 per member (including services and research etc): the Lords cost £150,000. Lady Howe felt that the idea of replacing current arrangements in the Lords with an elected House was absurd as it would then merely be a duplication of the Lower House.

Lady Howe moved on to the ASCL Bill, currently near the end of the Report Stage. She had been very much involved with drafting revisions to the Bill which dealt with raising the school leaving age, apprenticeships and emphasised the need for skilling and up-skilling. It removed the responsibility for the education of young people in offender institutions and prisons from the prison governor to education authorities. It was essential that those in institutions should be educated to give them a chance in future. Without literacy and numeracy skills they were more likely to remain in the criminal system. In relation to the need to provide help and support for the young, and to families, it was so important that children's centres were spreading across the whole country. In relation to this, Lady Howe had raised issues about governors and their responsibilities. It was often difficult to divine what responsibilities and oversights lay with the governing body and in consequence she had been talking with the Bill team on these matters and with the Children's Minister, Baroness Delyth Morgan, who had been very receptive to ideas. Regrettably, however, the Government line was that what governance was needed should be worked out at local authority level. She had argued that the arrangements should be 'on the face of' the Bill, even if there was no plan to put these into practice yet.

Baroness Howe ended by voicing her 'huge respect for governors and all that they do' and by toasting the good work of governors.

The Key Note Speaker was then introduced – Christine Gilbert, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools. She began by highlighting the crucial importance of governors in making a difference for children and young people. She felt it right that the governor role should be in focus in the new Ofsted Framework.

Christine described the extent of Ofsted's remit now that it encompassed four inspection branches, and the difficulties of wrestling with a new vision statement for the combined body. Finally, they had agreed on alphabetical order – care, education and skills. The new body inspected on behalf of 'users', children and learners, employers and parents.

She then turned to the governors' role and to the changes she had seen in the past as a headteacher, after the introduction of LMS and the increased freedom and responsibility. She reminded the Conference of the three roles – the strategic view, the critical friend and ensuring accountability. Although, she said, governors were not always good at the second role, she had seen governance improve dramatically over the years. There was a synergy between the roles of

governors and what Ofsted looked for, which was why in the new framework the governing body was more prominent. Christine reminded members that the latest edition of *Matters Arising* (the NGA magazine) contained the descriptors for the effectiveness of the governing body in support and challenge. If the role was to be well carried out in this regard, it must be supported by data that was presented by the professionals clearly and in a meaningful way. All governors must understand performance data – not just those relating to standards/results but those on other aspects of the school as well. Governors must look for themselves at the overall provision by visiting the school and by garnering parents' perceptions perhaps through questionnaires or parent focus groups. If they did not interrogate the data they wouldn't do all they could for their schools. Interestingly, Christine urged caution with data as 'it doesn't give answers. It should make you ask questions.' There were two final aspects regarding the area of governance. She listed the five features of effective leadership and management: single minded focus on what matters; impact of the senior team in the school and the community; simple and effective management systems; good use of data; and purposeful partnerships. And she defined 'Outstanding' leadership as: "*strategic and focused on achievement and improvement; collectively knowledgeable and making best use of individual skills and expertise; and working in partnership with the community, listening to and acting on the views of pupils and parents.*"

Christine turned then to the new framework itself. The aim was to reduce the burden of inspection on institutions. She listed the various periods between visits, and features of the inspection process, including notice, streamlined SEF, emphasis on the views of parents and pupils, time in school and in lessons and the importance of governors. Ofsted would respond to concerns raised by parents, for instance if there were a large number of complaints about an academy, a section 5 inspection would be carried out. The new framework looked at outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils, the school's capacity to improve and its overall effectiveness. There was a sharper focus on all aspects of pupil outcomes, based on the ECM agenda. In leadership and management, the need was for ambition and focus, an effective governing body, engagement with parents, effective partnerships to promote learning and well-being, equal opportunities and willingness to tackle discrimination, sound safeguarding procedures, community cohesion and value for money. In making judgements, progress should be measured, not just on exam results, but by sitting in lessons, looking through books and talking to staff. It was possible to have low results but be making good progress and to be judged 'Good' in the overall assessment.

Finally, there were three questions to ask: 'Do you help shape the vision and direction of the school?' 'How do you ensure that the school fulfils its statutory duties, including safeguarding, and the promotion of inclusive policies to SEN, race equality, disability and gender'; and 'How do you challenge and support the school's leaders?'

The Chair thanked Christine and invited questions from delegates. Questions asked were:

**Qu:** Pleased to hear emphasis on challenge but what do you do in an academy, where the sponsor controls everything and the governing body can't or is not allowed to, challenge?

**Ans:** We have no role in commenting on this. We would need evidence. (We're looking at what makes governance good or outstanding.)

**Qu:** You said governors should spend time in school and imply that governors are experts. How can we make the best value of classroom visits?

**Ans:** I wouldn't want to suggest anything. Have a programme worked out. Different things work in different situations.

**Qu:** An LA inspector has said: 'If your school does not achieve Government targets in attainment, it can only be judged as Satisfactory.' If this is a myth, it needs dispelling. Please make sure LA officers know that this is a myth.

**Ans:** He was completely incorrect. 30 schools with lowest grades were nevertheless judged Good overall. As to myths, Ofsted is producing a monthly bulletin for LAs to give correct information..

**Qu:** You said that it was important to speak to the chair of governors but can we have an assurance that another governor can accompany the chair if that person has the best information on some aspects of school?

**Ans:** It does not need to be the chair and it is quite acceptable to have two governors at the meeting with the inspectors.

After the break, Judy Hardagon, Chief Executive of the School Food Trust, spoke on 'Making the case for healthy food in schools'. The SFT's role was to help schools and LAs and to advise the Government. The September edition of *Matters Arising* had contained a great deal of information about the SFT and healthy food in schools. SFT tried to use the 'pester power' of children to encourage parents to learn to cook; it created curriculum packs on how 'food' could be used as a topic; and encouraged the view that eating together was an important social interaction. Originally food-based standards had been set for school lunches; followed by food standards across the rest of the day – for tuck shops, healthy snacks, etc: and now there were nutrient-based standards, which schools and LAs should apply to reach a balance and set minima and maxima provision. These were flexible and did not aim to deny children chips! Healthy food and exercise were part of a child's education and addressed behaviour, concentration and obesity. It had been shown that a change to school lunch habits had resulted in children being more alert in the afternoon. This was all part of well-being and the ECM agenda. Packed lunches could be a problem and it was sensible for schools to have a policy that addressed not only food provided in school but packed lunches too.

An SFT audit and inspection project, in partnership with Ofsted, had looked at what compliance was needed in school food terms in nutrient-based standards. There was now a software tool to find recipes and to see how to be compliant. It was not as daunting as it sounded. The SFT website was there to provide help and information

After thanking Judy, the Chair introduced the final part of the conference. NGA tried to include something *a little different* in its events and today it was **Shakespeare in Schools**. Chris Grace, director of the Shakespeare in Schools Festival, explained the background. Arising originally from producing Animated Shakespeare for schools, the project now aimed at helping schools give 30 minute presentations of 'complete' Shakespeare plays, and presenting these in theatres. Currently there were 500 schools involved. By 2010 the goal was 700 schools, with 850 by 2011 and 1000 in 2012. Part of the project was to provide workshops for teachers to help them work with pupils. Chris then introduced two schools. The first school gave an excellent performance of *Much Ado about Nothing*, characterised by clarity of speech and complete focus. The second performance, of *Richard III*, included the use of masks, mime and an amazingly clever series of tableaux depicting the Battle of Bosworth. It had tremendous impact. Both performances were superb. At the end Chris Grace told the conference that the pupils came from years 8 to 11!

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