

## DAGB NEWSLETTER ARTICLE

### NGA SPECIAL SCHOOLS CONFERENCE 16/5/2015

Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> May saw the second NGA conference for governors of special schools. The conference was opened by NGA Chief Executive, Emma Knights, who thanked governors from the Special School Governors' Forum (SSGF) for their request for this follow up conference and for supporting the interests of special schools. The SSGF act as a special interest group of the NGA and meet termly at the NGA offices in Birmingham. All governors are welcome and anyone interested in attending their next meeting can arrange this via [gillian.allcroft@nga.org.uk](mailto:gillian.allcroft@nga.org.uk)

Jane Friswell, Chief Executive of Nasen (National Association for Special Educational Needs) spoke about the recent SEND Code of Practice 2014 reforms and the opportunities and challenges they presented for special school governors. The SEND reforms mark a new approach to joining up education, health and care from birth to 25.

The reforms have a family centred focus. A key strength of special schools is that they have already been working in this way for many years. Special schools in the maintained, academy, non-maintained and independent sectors, special post-16 institutions and specialist colleges all have an important role to play in providing for children and young people with SEN and in working collaboratively with mainstream and special settings to develop and share expertise and approaches. Mainstream schools can learn a tremendous amount from special schools colleagues with regard to multi-agency working. There is a fantastic opportunity for effective collaboration and for schools to talk to each other across sectors.

One of the key changes within the reforms is the requirement for LA's to formulate a 'Local Offer', which must set out an authority-wide description of the special educational and training provision it expects to be available in its area and outside its area for children and young people who have SEN or disabilities. This includes information about the arrangements the LA has for funding children and young people with SEN, including any agreements about how providers will use any delegated budgets. However, there is no proactive duty to assess SEN, a situation which is likely to remain unchanged given that LA's will continue to lose funding.

Education, Health and Care Plans are another key change within the reforms. The timeline for the implementation of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) to replace statements is April 2018. This is completely off target at present. Lord Nash stated in May 2014 that "No child or young person should lose their statement and not have it replaced with an EHCP simply because the system is changing". How wrong this has subsequently proven to be. Jane noted that the last time reforms were undertaken on this scale the process took more than 8 years to complete. In this regard, we have not learnt from history.

Mary Rayner, a former Headteacher of an outstanding special school, now operating in the newly created role of Ofsted National Lead for Disability and Special Educational Needs, gave the conference an insight into the Ofsted inspection process for special schools.

Special schools are not only different from mainstream schools, they can also be vastly different from each other. Whatever the setting, we need to ensure that we maintain high aspirations for those in our care and share best practice where disabled pupils and those with SEN are making the best progress. With regard to the inclusive nature of the new code

of practice, we need to evaluate how well our pupils do within the context of the school and ensure their participation in decision making. Assessment and identification are central to the new code of practice. Not every teacher has assessment skills. We need to ensure that every teacher is a teacher of every child.

Governors have a crucial strategic role to fulfil in driving up standards, particularly in view of the inequality of access which exists nationally. In some areas, it is possible for pupils to go completely through the education system without ever having attended a good school.

Effective governance is an intrinsic component of good leadership, however, good governance is not universal and we need to maintain a relentless focus on improving our own practice as well as that of the school. It is important to consider how adaptable teaching and learning is in meeting the needs of all cohorts and to adopt a determined approach to knowing our schools rather than being told about them.

Where governance is weak, inspectors commonly report that governors are not ambitious about expectations, do not visit the school, are over reliant on others for information and data, lack engagement with school improvement planning and have a limited role in monitoring and evaluating actions. Governing boards need to review their practice annually. Collaborative working with other schools can provide governors with the opportunity to see how governance looks elsewhere, and can also help governors assess their own school's evidence about how well pupils are achieving.

Gillian Allcroft, NGA Policy Manager, led a discussion about work experience and employment. This has been a consistent topic for the NGA during the past 3 years. The national statistics for the employment of young people with special educational needs and disabilities are shocking. The lack of employment opportunities for young people with SEND is worrying and much more needs to be done to raise the profile, particularly in view of work experience. It is vitally important for governors to ensure that what we do for our pupils whilst they are in education is not being subsequently lost. This is an issue which the NGA will be pursuing with the Department for Education.

Katie Michelin, Associate Solicitor, Browne Jacobsen, spoke to the conference about the legal duties of governing boards under the new special educational needs framework. The main legal duties on schools have not changed, but the way they will be met may change. Schools must meet their duties under the Equality Act for pupils with disabilities and use their 'best endeavours' to meet pupils' special educational needs. Parental engagement underpins the whole of the provision process and statutory duties include informing parents of SEN support and involving them in progress reviews.

Schools also have a legal duty to admit a young person where the school is named in an EHC plan, have regard to the 0-25 SEND Code of Practice, produce and publish an ongoing SEN report online, appoint a suitably qualified SENCO, co-operate with the LA in developing a Local Offer and make arrangements to support pupils with medical conditions.

Gillian Allcroft drew the conference to a close with a facilitated discussion about questions for special school governors to ask in the hope of Knowing Your School. The discussion covered some of the key factors which make our special schools different, expectations for SEND pupils, the quality of pupil progress data and the current lack of benchmarking information for special schools.

The NGA intend to progress all of the issues raised by governors throughout the day and this will be reported upon in a future issue of the NGA's Governing Matters magazine.

George Craig

Chair of Governors at the Lapal/Lutley Federation and member of DAGB Executive