

## **National Governors Association Special Schools Advisory Group (SSAG) meeting held on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2015.**

Following on from the NGA Special Schools Conference held on the 16<sup>th</sup> May 2015, and reported on to governors in the Autumn issue of the DAGB newsletter by George Craig, Chair of Governors at the Lapal/Lutley Federation, I was asked by Brian Patterson, Chair of DAGB, whether I would be interested in attending this forum, facilitated by the NGA, and held at their offices in Birmingham.

Having been a governor in special schools within the Dudley borough for a number of years, I am always interested in meeting fellow governors, not only within the borough but those from further afield to gain an insight into the problems (and solutions) of special schools nationally dealing with the educational outcomes of pupils contained within those schools.

The meeting on the 29<sup>th</sup> September was really about addressing issues raised by delegates of the Special Schools Conference held earlier in the year and having an informed discussion relating to the various issues raised. The informal nature of the forum leads to some very frank and enlightening debate about a wide range of issues. Not everything discussed is immediately relevant to each delegate but it has to be said that most things we talked about affect a great number of educational establishments and, if nothing else, serve to reinforce that old saying of 'never being alone' – even though it doesn't always feel like that at the time.

As well as special school governors from far and wide attending the meeting, 'sitting in' were Gillian Allcroft (NGA Policy Manager) and Paul Aber (NGA Head of Training Development), himself a Special School governor.

Issues raised at the Special Schools Conference and fed back to this forum included Benchmarking, funding (no surprise there then), Human Resources, the Post 16 agenda and a decreasing number of suitable work experience environments for pupils and young adults, as well as curriculum, Health and Safety and Ofsted concerns. Of the above almost 1 in 4 delegates at the Special Schools Conference placed the lack of benchmarking data as a major concern and 1 in 5 had major concerns surrounding funding.

The possibility of benchmarking has been previously explored by the FFT although it was decided that it would be too difficult to compare data due to the individualistic nature of special schools. Funding unsurprisingly caused some concern with calls for a more consistent funding formula, one that is fair to schools and didn't penalize the many small special schools whose pupil numbers, although low when compared to mainstream establishments, provide a vital service in the provision of worthwhile educational outcomes for some of the most disadvantaged pupils in the educational system as a whole. HR concerns focused on the difficulty many special schools have around recruitment alongside, in some areas, a high rate of absenteeism.

The lack of work experience placements and opportunities available to pupils once they have left school are also giving rise to concern. Much of the hard work done by schools is being lost and there are few, if any, opportunities for young people to continue to develop and mature using the skills they have already acquired.

The post 16 debate has already been raised as an important issue within government departments by the NGA and we governors look forward to a frank and full dialogue with interested parties to address concerns not only of schools and governors but, more importantly, parents.

The next meeting of the SSAG is due to take place in February 2016, when no doubt many if not all the issues discussed around the table at this meeting will still be at the forefront of the debate.

As with our mainstream colleagues, if we can share good practice , maintain high standards , expect the very highest outcomes from our pupil population in special schools , then we may make inroads into some of the very real concerns surrounding the SEND agenda .

Anyone wishing to raise any particular issues mentioned in this article or to discuss any concerns should in the first instance contact me through the Chair of DAGB, Brian Patterson.

Paul Leyshon (Chair at Pens Meadow and Vice-Chair at Rosewood)  
*[Thanks are due to Paul for attending this meeting]*