

# **Representing You – but Where and How?**

Copies of the Termly Briefing Notes issued to DAGB representatives on all member Governing Bodies (and which, hopefully, are given out to all governors, or their contents communicated at the first full meeting of each term) refer to the role of DAGB in representing governors on a number of different committees within the Borough. Quite possibly, some governors will not be aware of exactly what this means – what is the function of a particular committee? – and why does it matter to either individual governors, or to their Governing Body, or to their school, or within the Borough at all? Consequently the purpose of this article is to provide outline details of some of these committees and how they matter – to you.

## **School Organisation Committee**

During the course of the past twelve months or so the School Organisation Committee (SOC) has had a high profile. This has been because of one of its functions, namely that of considering (and approving or otherwise) proposals from the Local Authority to close some schools within the Borough. Sanctioning the closing of schools has never been the only function of the SOC – however it is possibly the most distasteful. The views of the Schools Group (governors) have been clearly stated at relevant meetings and are on record; they have supported some, but not all, of the proposals put forward for consideration relevant to closures. However, in making decisions, members of the SOC do have access to a considerable number of sources of information as well as to all responses to closure proposals

The SOC consists of five member groups, governors comprising the Schools Group, in addition to which there are two Church Groups, one Catholic and one Church of England, the Local Authority (elected members) Group and the Learning and Skills Council Group (which only functions on the SOC in the context of Secondary School decisions).

To set this Committee in context, other matters discussed in recent times have included:-

- The Borough's Children and Young People's Plan
- The Primary Review Refresh
- DfES Consultation on Foundation Schools
- DfES Consultation on the Expansion of Successful and Popular Schools
- Review of the School Organisation Plan
- Consultation on the Rationalization of Plans Required of Local Authorities

However the SOC will cease to exist shortly as the Education and Inspections Act of 2006 discontinued the statutory requirement on Local Authorities to retain such a body.

## **Schools Forum**

Set up in 2002 as a statutory body, the Schools Forum deals with financial issues which impact upon Children's Services within the Borough. Dealing with some £200 million pounds of income (and expenditure) each year means that the Forum needs to meet six times per annum. Its membership includes both the Director and the Assistant Director of Children's Services (as observers and with 'speaking' rights – but without voting rights) as well as members of the Educational Accountancy service to provide "expert" input, but again without voting rights. Of the 21 voting members, 8 are school governors (from DAGB) and a further 8 are Head Teachers. The remaining five places go to representatives of the Learning and Skills Council, of the Churches' Diocesan Education membership and of the (Education) Professional Bodies and Unions.

The Forum has a number of statutory functions but it might be helpful to consider issues discussed during recent months, which give a flavour of agendas:-

- School Reserves
- 2007-08 Schools Budget funded by the Dedicated Schools Grant
- Special Schools Formula Review
- Dudley Scheme for Financing Schools
- Formula Funding for Changing Schools – PAN Increases
- Financial Implications of Primary and Secondary Reviews
- Small Schools Protection Funding Review
- Minimum Funding Guarantee
- Pupil Retention Funding
- Schools Financial Benchmarking Consultation

Inevitably some of the issues are somewhat involved which more than justifies the presence of members of the Accountancy Service to provide advice and explanation.

### **Local Admissions Forum**

Although Dudley has had an Admissions Forum for many years it is only relatively recently that it became a statutory duty for them to have one. Representation on the Forum includes an Assistant Director, Headteachers, Church representatives, school governors (through DAGB) and a representative from the Dudley Racial Equality Council.

Their main functions include:-

- To consider how effectively both existing and proposed admissions arrangements of all admissions authorities within the Borough serve the interests of children and parents within Dudley
- To promote agreement on admissions issues
- To consider the quality and appropriateness of all literature provided relevant to admissions into the Borough schools
- To monitor the effectiveness of the Authorities co-ordinated admissions arrangements (including the recently introduced on-line applications process)
- To consider improvements to the admissions process and to monitor the distribution of admissions into the Borough's schools at key stages in the admissions cycle
- To develop and monitor strategies for dealing with applications for admissions to schools within the Borough at times other than the main entry points (September for all schools and also, currently, January for primary schools)
- To consider admissions arrangements for Looked After children, children with Special Educational Needs and those Hard to Place children
- The monitoring of admissions arrangements within neighbouring authorities.

Members of the Forum meet, typically five times each year, to receive and to discuss reports on the foregoing aspects of the Admissions Service. They try to ensure that the whole process of admissions is as fair as possible within the Borough and that the materials produced to assist parents in the process of indicating their preferences for admission are as helpful as can be achieved.

Recent meetings have included discussion on the new (national) Admissions Code of Practice 2007 and the on-line application system; this latter has proved remarkably successful in Dudley since it was introduced first at the end of 2005. With a figure of 31% for secondary school applications against a target set by the Government of 5 to 10% and with figures in neighbouring authorities only achieving double figures in two cases out of the eleven local authorities, Dudley's results are most impressive.

## **Governance Advisory Group**

The purpose of the Governance Advisory Group (GAG) is to advise the Director of Childrens' Services on any matters which impact upon school governance; it is seen as a component in the "school improvement" agenda, although it would be short-sighted to think of governance only in that context.

The membership of the group includes an Assistant Director, members of the Governor Support and Governor Training teams, headteachers, link governors, DAGB and other relevant community groups.

Amongst other items 'open for discussion' are:-

- The Governor Training programme
- The Clerking Service
- Other Support Services
- Support from the Directorate for effective governance as a component within the school improvement agenda
- Communication with both individual governors and with governing bodies
- Recruitment and retention of governors
- The Childrens' Services Plan
- The Directorate's Governance Development Plan.

At recent meetings, issues discussed included vacancies for school governors within the Borough and approaches being used in order to improve recruitment rates. The existing governor training programme was addressed, identifying the most and the least popular courses, as well as additional provision being brought about by recent legislation which directly affects the work of governing bodies.

The possibility of "going for" Chartermark, a quality standard for public services, was discussed as a means of improving, and continuing to improve, the services provided within Dudley governance.

The Presentation Evening organised to recognise the work of long-serving governors was on a recent agenda. At the same time issues such as the implications for governors of the Childcare Bill have been an important focus for recent meetings of the group.

We would hope that governors throughout the Borough would provide input to this group by using the mechanism available to them of the DAGB e-mail address ([dagb@dudley.gov.uk](mailto:dagb@dudley.gov.uk))

## **Other Representations**

Whilst the first four described earlier are given in some detail there are several other areas where DAGB represents governors' interests – for example in dealing with the Traded Services functions that have to be approved annually for their school by all governing bodies. Building (and associated) work, currently prioritised by the use of a matrix, is the responsibility of the Asset Management Planning Group – and, again, governors, nominated by DAGB, are well represented.

When the Education Development Plan was in existence (prior to the creation of the Childrens' Services Directorate) its six strands were regularly monitored by teams, again including DAGB members. It is expected that an equivalent monitoring will occur in relation to the Childrens' Services Development Plan. Ofsted interviewed school governors when they inspected the educational work of the Authority – again nominated by DAGB.

In addition, members of DAGB's Executive meets with the Borough MPs as often as can be arranged to express concerns as appropriate with, amongst other things, the levels of funding allocated to education within the Borough from Westminster.

Members across the Borough may feel confident that DAGB is, and always has been, working hard in the best interests of education within the Borough – and representatives do make real contributions to the effective functioning of so many relevant bodies.