

Association News – Easter 2014

A number of issues have dominated the work of the Association in recent months but we identify here only the more important of these:-

Area Meetings

Although (for some unaccountable reason) not reported in the Christmas Newsletter we held a first Area Meeting on October 17th 2013 on the twin themes of the Fischer Family Trust (FFT) Data Dashboard for Governors and the Pupil Premium. Some 60 or so governors attended the event and all presentations given were subsequently e-mailed to all delegates. The consensus was that the issues addressed by the presenters (Chris Wood of the FFT, and Patrick Finegan, Head of the Virtual School in Dudley) were highly relevant and well covered.

A second Area Meeting was held on April 3rd 2014 on the subject of the Governors' Role in Teachers' Performance Related Pay when, again, about 60 governors listened to a presentation by Gillian Allcroft, Policy Manager for the National Governors' Association (NGA) – we were fortunate to be able to secure Gillian's presence for this event as she has been heavily involved in the development of the work relating to this topic with the Department for Education and with the National College. This proved to be a highly interactive meeting, the moreso as many delegates began to appreciate for the first time the full extent of the changes to the Pay Structures and the associated responsibilities thereby devolved to Governing Bodies. The point was made from the floor that, although there were representatives present of just over one third of the Governing Bodies within Dudley, the issue affected every governor in the Borough and others would have benefitted from attendance.

Universal Free School Meals

The situation that was described in the Christmas 2013 edition of the DAGB Newsletter has led to much further activity. The whole issue was fully analyzed and communication has taken place with two of our local Members of Parliament and with David Laws, Minister of State for Childrens' Services – the Minister has responded directly to our correspondence and, in consequence, a number of clarifications to the original proposals have been made. We continue to communicate with the Minister and to challenge areas where there exists a lack of clarity. Amongst the issues was the question of cash flow; it was stated that schools would be paid for meals given freely to newly eligible children in Reception, Years 1 and 2 on the basis of "actual take up" – this meant that schools would have to claim back the costs after the event and that, potentially at least, they might be required to wait for some time before they were reimbursed; we made the point that this could create a cash-flow problem for schools, whose budgets were stretched at the best of times. Our dialogue with the Minister has led to a far more realistic arrangement; schools will receive a first payment in June 2014 which will assume that 87% of their newly eligible (for free meals) children do

take up the free meals opportunity and will cover the costs incurred thereby over the first two terms of the 2014 to 2015 academic year. A second payment will then be made in April 2015 for the balance of the year – at this point the payment will be adjusted (up or down) based upon ***actual*** take-up. The 87% figure is based upon the experiences of the pilot trials of Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) and even if this figure does not match the actual Dudley figure it should relieve schools of the financial concerns which we had brought to the attention of the Minister.

The most significant issue that still remains relates to the possibility that the scheme might be extended to cover the whole of Key Stage 2 as well, as had been recommended in The School Food Plan published in July of last year and authored by Henry Dimbleby and John Vincent. We readily accept the numerous virtues of so doing and we note that the Government has put in place legislation that will enable this to happen. The issues are, of course, the “if” and the “when”. Any changes to school kitchens and/or to dining areas require a proper planning process and whilst it has been acknowledged that the introduction of UFSM in September will necessitate doing so to cater for Key Stage 1 children, we really do need to be able to plan most effectively if we have also to cater for Key Stage 2 as well. If this is not done then the process will become one of two separate and independent stages, involving far more cost and disruption than might otherwise be necessary.

Whilst we recognise the difficulties in making the relevant KS2 decision, with an election not too far away and the certainty of there being a new Government in power (of whatever colour it might happen to be) in 2015, we do still feel that it is important to get a constructive answer to this issue and are currently in communication to that effect.

Competition

For the fifth consecutive year we have our “Healthy Lifestyle” competition running for all children educated in the Borough, with sponsorship from the Public Health Department (previously the local PCT). This time the theme relates to Cyber-Safety and we are looking forward to there being a large number of entries and to seeing and judging them in readiness for a Presentation evening at Saltwells E.D.C. on Thursday June 12th.

Childrens’ Life Style

We are reading more and more about young people spending less and still less time out of doors and commented upon this in the Christmas Newsletter. In a very recent issue of The Telegraph is a contribution by Lord (Sebastian) Coe, and in it he says “Today’s children are the least active generation in history. They also might be the first generation to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents” - whatever the basis for Lord Coe’s observations may be, the statement is a sobering one and echoes what has been said before by others during the past year or so. To continue, he also says (and, since he quotes figures these

must be assumed to come from research work already undertaken and so to have a measure of reliability) “By the age of 15, European children are half as active as they were aged nine. As a nation we are currently a fifth less active than we were in 1961 and if things don’t change rapidly, we are on course to be 35% less active by 2030. The price we pay is high. Inactive children don’t perform as well in school and are less likely to go to University.” As far as health is concerned he goes on to say “Worldwide, inactivity is closely linked to more than nine million premature deaths. According to the NHS, inactivity costs Britain nearly £10 billion every year for just five conditions (including two cancers, cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes)”

We are investigating the work of other bodies such as Sport England, the National Trust, English Heritage, the Scout movement and the Youth Hostels Association to see how they are reacting to such comments. It does seem exceptionally unlikely that any will disagree strongly with Lord Coe’s statements, even if they might question the actual figures quoted. We are already working with the Black Country Consortium Primary School Sports Premium committee who are actively promoting the effective use of the Sports Premium (referred to in Simon Hall’s article in the December Newsletter) of between £8,500 and £11,000 per school each year now for five years . Any suggestions that readers might make would, as always, be most welcome.

Annual General Meeting

The Association will be holding its A.G.M. at Saltwells at 7.00 pm on Thursday July 3rd and we invite as many members as possible to attend, not only the D.A.G.B. representatives. All will be most welcome and we look forward to hearing your views and suggestions at that meeting as indeed we do at any time.

Brian Patterson
Chair, DAGB