

## What Is DAGB Up To?

One early outcome of setting up a *new* Executive with a *new* Chair last Summer was to give consideration to ways whereby we could improve communication with members. The Newsletter, or at least its contents, became one of those targets for change. For this reason, this issue, and those following, will always include a report on the activities undertaken on behalf of Dudley Governors by the Association and, where possible, the outcomes of actions taken. Because this particular Newsletter has had to “go to print” much earlier than might ordinarily be the case, the list of those activities is rather more modest than it might usually be expected to be. However it does represent a start on what, we believe, governors in the Borough have a right to expect.

The Executive started with a number of topics which were believed to be of importance to Dudley governors. These included SATs marking from the Summer of 2008, the issue of Single Status and Equal Pay and that of the Dudley Property Consultancy (DPC) Survey. Subsequently at the Area meeting on October 15<sup>th</sup> these were confirmed as being relevant and a number of others suggested.

### **SATs Marking**

It is exceptionally unlikely that any school was not affected in some measure by the debacle of last Summer’s marking (or mis-marking perhaps). Members of the Executive expressed their concerns about the effects upon children who had taken the tests, on their parents and on schools. They were conscious that teachers had done so much to prepare children for those tests only, subsequently, to experience grossly excessive delays in obtaining the results and, in far too many cases, to be forced to cope with erroneous marking. Questions were raised as to why an American company should have been entrusted with the marking and how things had gone so very wrong. The consequence of this was to write, in the strongest of terms, to the Chief Executive of QCA, to the Secretary of State for Childrens’ Services and to the Conservative and Liberal Democrat spokesmen for Education. The letters clearly reflected the concerns expressed earlier.

At the time of writing we have had three responses (but are following up on the one who, so far, has failed to reply). The first, from the Liberal Democrat spokesman for Education, David Laws MP, says “It is our view that Key Stage testing should be slimmed down and it was the Liberal Democrats who argued first for the abolition of the Key Stage 3 tests, recently announced by the Government”. He also referred to the Sutherland inquiry (into what went wrong with this Summer’s marking and administration of the tests) saying “Once the results of the review are known, we will make additional recommendations for reforming the current marking system”.

The response from Jim Knight MP, as Minister of State for Schools and Learners, was fulsome and was clearly specifically addressing the points made in DAGB’s letter. He apologized for all the outcomes of the episode and referred also to the Sutherland inquiry. He said, in his letter “the delay in the release of results was caused by speed of marking and technical issues. Those difficulties have now been resolved .....”; we trust that the Sutherland inquiry will elaborate on this but remain somewhat surprised

that Jim Knight should be *able* to state a reason before the release of the inquiry findings. He was asked why ETS had been awarded the contract for the marking, and responded by saying that the responsibility rested solely with QCA and that Ministers had no involvement with such a decision.

The letter to QCA was answered by the Director of the National Curriculum tests at the National Assessment Agency, David Barrett. Again, he did clearly attempt to reply constructively to the points we had made, and was, indeed, very apologetic for the furore caused. There were the inevitable assurances that “they” were working hard to ensure that this was not repeated in 2009 and also that much depended on the findings of the Sutherland inquiry. One statement, however, does not appear to “square” with the experiences undergone by many schools. It is that “...the papers have been marked, in the main, by the same pool of markers as previous years. Markers were trained by senior examiners in the use of the mark schemes and did not commence live marking until they reached the required standard of proficiency. Also there were ongoing quality assurance checks during ‘live’ marking, as in previous years.” Whilst we do recognise that this process is standard practice, it fails to explain why there was such concern over significant mis-marking (to an extent that was considerably in excess over what had been experienced previously).

We have requested details of the Sutherland findings, when available, but are also now investigating other specific issues arising as they relate to Dudley schools.

### **Single Status and Equal Pay**

Full details of the situation were presented in the previous Newsletter. At this point in time, the Authority is completing the final steps in the single status process and is in negotiation with the relevant unions. We do not therefore know, as yet, the full financial implications. On October 17<sup>th</sup> John Freeman, Director of Children’s Services, wrote to all Headteachers with a statement from David Caunt, Leader of the Council, which should have been communicated to all members of the Governing Body (and we are assuming that Heads have indeed passed this on). The statement itself was very clear and reasonable and apologized for the delays involved. The Council has been given Government approval for borrowing money to pay the costs of this process but clearly such a loan will have to be repaid. Our position is to try to influence that repayment process in such a way as to cause the minimum negative impact upon our schools, whilst still being very well aware that, to quote a Yorkshire expression “you’ll not get owt for nowt”.

### **Dudley Property Consultancy (DPC)**

The DPC Survey is reported upon elsewhere in the Newsletter but, whilst we are pleased with the progress so far, we are pressing for further meetings between ourselves and the DPC team, but to also include representatives from Children’s Services and from Education Finance. Perhaps the quote from Brian Gordon, in charge of DPC (and Assistant Director, Law and Property) is relevant and, indeed, most encouraging “I very much welcome the opportunity to work with colleagues in DAGB in advancing these areas of common improvement”.

We are very conscious of our debt to those governor colleagues who provided the feedback from the survey on DPC that we conducted earlier in the year – the response rate was extremely good (at about 40% - compared to the more commonly experienced 5% to 10% for postal surveys). The feedback provided numerous pointers for our meeting with the DPC team and they, in their turn, acknowledged that there was scope for improvement in a number of areas.

### **Other Issues**

The three issues described earlier remain ongoing and we will pursue them until either we achieve resolution or until we can see that there is no (realistic) point in going further. At the Area Meeting on October 15<sup>th</sup> we asked governors present to provide us with their opinions as to what *other* issues mattered to them and to their colleagues. The responses were, predictably, quite diverse, but included:-

- Academies
- Trusts and Trust Schools
- Primary Review
- Statistics on Head Teacher appointments locally
- Failing Schools
- Appointments of New Director/Assistant Directors
- Ofsted
- Health and Safety Issues
- Financial Management Standards (FMS)

There has not been much opportunity, since that meeting, to do much about addressing these other issues. However we have made a start. The whole subject of Academies is one which is alien to the experiences of Dudley governors so that, apart from those (currently) directly engaged in discussion over the Authorities' plans to permit the development of two academies to replace Castle High School and Crestwood/Pensnett, other governors know very little. We approached John Freeman and he agreed to provide an article on the subject of Academies for us, which appears elsewhere in this issue. We can, however, feel certain that more debate will ensue.

Two Educational Trusts have so far been created, one in Halesowen and one in Stourbridge – and, once again, many governors will not really understand their functions nor their importance. Whilst we have not had the time to address this particular topic as yet, it will certainly be open for debate in the future.

Noting that (from John Freeman's article) Academies are being developed to replace schools achieving 30% or less in the "5 A\* to C GCSE grades including English and Maths" category, questions were raised as to what defines a "Failing School" and a strongly held view materialized that it should not be based upon academic success (or lack of) alone. Coupled with the issue of Ofsted inspections, the Executive agreed that the principal focus for the next Area Meeting in March 2009, should be on these topics – we are inviting Ofsted to send a representative and also approaching one of the Regional Inspection Providers for an input. This promises to be a stimulating meeting and more details will be supplied early in the New Year.

One final point, however. In dealing with issues, such as the SATs marking, we have attempted to communicate with representatives of the three major political parties so as to provide as wide a range of views as possible. Where it is appropriate to seek input from politicians we will always try to be as even-handed as possible and under no circumstances will we take any political “position” – our only focus remains that of supporting education within the Borough.

We do intend to hold a meeting specifically for DAGB representatives, probably in February, along the lines of the Link Governor Briefings that are already well established. Any other ideas that you have as to how we can improve upon our means of communicating with you (or you with us) would be most welcome.

We do need to hear from you, individually or from Governing bodies, what your views are on some (or all) of the topics being addressed this year. We can only adequately reflect your views if you let us know what those views are. Equally well, we would be pleased to hear from you of any other issues that you would like to see being addressed. E-mails sent to [DAGB@Dudley.gov.uk](mailto:DAGB@Dudley.gov.uk) will come straight through to us and any postal communications can be sent to myself via Governor Support at Westox House.

Brian A S Patterson  
Chair, DAGB