

Devon Association of Governors

Issues raised at Area Meetings Spring 2005

This report is a summary of points raised by governors at the Area Meetings held earlier this term in the following Local Learning Communities: Chulmleigh & South Molton : Totnes, Dartmouth, Ivybridge, Kingsbridge & South Dartmoor : Okehampton, Tavistock and Holsworthy. These meetings were attended by governors, clerks and headteachers and many schools from the identified areas were represented. Discussion focused initially on the termly 'Checklist' of current issues sent to all Devon schools at the beginning of each term but also embraced other issues of current concern raised by those present. The sections in italics indicate responses (where received) from LEA officers, NGC and NASG to the points raised. The remainder of the text reflects comments and information emanating from the meetings themselves. Please share this report with the members of your Governing Body.

1. The Freedom of Information Act

No immediate issues were reported, however it was noted that it may affect the way in which people communicate in the future.

NASG general comment: "Undoubtedly the general point about communication is true. The NASG has joined an informal group consisting of police, health, local government and education representatives in order to spread good practice. The FoI Act was covered in a series of articles in Governors' News last year. "

Some of the questions below have provoked a lengthy correspondence between the NASG and Devon LEA to try to get to the bottom of DfES regulations ... so many thanks for raising these issues!

- Is the Publication Scheme statutory? *Richard Stevens (LEA Assistant Education Officer, Management Information Systems) comments: " Yes, each school/college is required to produce a Publication Schedule. To aid in this, the Information Commissioners Office has produced a 'Model Scheme' that can be downloaded and completed by individual establishments. This can be found at: <http://www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk/> ."* *NASG adds " The Information Commissioner's office is trawling through at present to find which public bodies do not have one. "*
- How much should schools charge for copying information that has been requested? *Richard Stevens: " In general, LEAs would not expect schools/colleges to charge a parent for a 'policy' etc. document. In any case, these should be included in the Publication Scheme and would therefore be exempt if they were already available either on the school website or in a file at the school office. If a school did wish to charge, this can only be for photocopying/printing and postage.... not for admin time. "*
- How long should information be stored? *Richard Stevens: " This cannot be answered as different documents have different retention periods. But never keep documents longer than necessary for Statutory/LEA or School purposes. The Records Management Society of Great Britain, has produced some guidelines and these are available on the Teachernet website at: <http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/FOIRecord.doc> NASG: " Only for as long as is necessary for management purposes. Information can be destroyed at any time and not be subject to FoI Act – BUT the exception is data that is subject to a request. So you can't decide to destroy information after you have been asked for it and in order not to disclose it. We advised members in one of our GN articles that this was a good time to clear out your cupboards and filing cabinets. Good records management is the key to ease of compliance – and is good management practice anyway. "*
- Pupil records - are they treated differently to other information? *Richard Stevens: " Yes, these would fall under the Data Protection Act and not the FoI Act. "*

On a lighter FoI note, a true story from the Deputy Chief Constable for Hampshire (passed on by NASG). They received the following request for information: " From I-like-men-in-uniform@hotmail.com . How many eligible bachelors are there in Hampshire Constabulary between the ages of 35 and 49? What are their email addresses, salary details and pension values? " They disclosed the answer to the first question but sadly had to refuse the others on Data Protection grounds! For more information contact Richard Stevens at richard.stevens@devon.gov.uk ' Summary Guidance for Governing Bodies ' by the DfES is available from www.governornet.gov.uk/publications and has been distributed to schools.

2. School Emergency Plan

There was some confusion over what this covers. Should the school adopt the Fire Drill for other emergencies such as a gas leak or an intruder? There is no model plan or policy but governors are recommended to discuss this and minute it at a full governors meeting. It is sensible for a school to be able to know where everyone is in case of an emergency.

- Should the LEA have a model policy for this? *Devon Governor Services comments: "The school emergency plan item has generated a lot of telephone calls. We have directed people to Health & Safety for a model, but it is as it sounds... what plan you have in place for: fire, flood, extreme weather eg heavy snow, pestilence, plague etc! It is common sense in the main and partly to deal with school closure procedure, or where the children will be taken to as a place of safety etc."* Further comment from the LEA: "We are working on a model. There is a lot of guidance located in the Health and Safety Manual Vol 1. In addition, the LEA has a help line which will deal with critical incidents. This is being trialed at Ivybridge LC and when agreed will be rolled out to other schools later. With regard to the Emergency Plan contact Keith Anderson on 01392 383369. The teachernet link <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/emergencies/> is also useful."

3. PROMISE MK4

Governors reported that there is an expectation for Devolved Formula Capital to be spent on maintenance - this is a concern for older schools that need to spend larger sums on maintenance. Small schools could benefit from pooling together resources to get certain jobs done. The LEA and schools have different responsibilities concerning the maintenance of buildings. If there is a dispute governors should put their concerns in writing. The GovernorLine helpline also gives good independent advice - tel. 08000 722181. If governors have any specific concerns they should contact Client Services in the first instance (Ray Beale). Any major concerns can be fed back to the SSSB (Schools Support Services Board). Further information from sam.allen@devon.gov.uk

Sam Allen (Head of Devon Property Services) comments: "My initial observation is that, although this item is entitled PROMISE Mk4, it is not essentially a PROMISE matter, but rather a question relating to the level of funding available for schools' maintenance. Devon Property does not set this funding level but, through the PROMISE proposal, we offer a service to schools to help them to spend available funding to gain maximum benefit.

Having said that, I acknowledge that the level of funding is a concern for some schools and we addressed this in the PROMISE document where we stated, on page 8:

'It has been recognised nationally, that for many years there has been under-investment in the maintenance of school buildings. This is now borne out in Devon through the AMP Condition Survey which shows a total maintenance backlog (excluding LMS) of over £50 million. The scale of the problem can be put into perspective when you consider that the total annual revenue maintenance budget (excluding LMS), which is delegated to schools, is just £3.7 million. This can be compared to the £8.3 million that the Audit Commission recommends should be spent annually on non LMS building maintenance for a school estate of our size. It is obvious that there is little prospect of tackling this work with delegated funding alone.'

In isolation, that appears to be a bleak situation, but taken in the round with other available funding, the picture is much brighter. This is because the funding necessary to tackle the backlog sits in a number of key areas:

- *delegated maintenance (Promise Mk4) - routine servicing and repairs*
- *DfES, through the LEA have devolved a very substantial element of capital funding to schools to deploy on strategic (Capital) maintenance, as well as other schemes of improvement*
- *The LEA have set aside funding within their capital programme to tackle large high priority items of structural replacement*

Older schools with high levels of backlog maintenance should, through a partnership approach with the LEA, be able to access several streams of funding (including their DFC) to help tackle these issues. Schools will need to consult with the LEA project officers supported by Devon Property surveyors to look at potential solutions for their schools. We are keen to help schools to get the most from their various funding streams.

The contact to discuss the details is Chris Jackson (chris.jackson@devon.gov.uk) who will be happy to talk to any school about their available funding and maintenance options.

Chris Jackson adds:

- *Irrespective of whether you are looking at MK 3 or MK 4, it is the same pot of money being managed for the mutual benefit of the subscribing schools but with a focus on the 'recurrent' items of maintenance rather than large items of capital maintenance which only benefit a small number schools and where other forms of funding are available (DFC and the LEA's capitalised maintenance programme).*
- *This is about getting a more equitable distribution of funding across all schools and why the guaranteed spend has been increased from 70% to 75%.*

- *Promise Mk4 aims to improve the degree to which we "plan" maintenance rather "react" to maintenance issues. This is a reality check! Promise is too small a fund to tackle all maintenance and governors/heads would have the same problem reconciling this whether in or out of Promise*
- *We have recognised one major concern around the financial cap on the revenue 'recurrent' items of work (typical repairs to elements) and have agreed to lift this but maintain it for capital 'strategic' items of work (typically wholesale replacement of elements).*
- *Details of the Promise Mk 4 were worked up by a committee made up of school representatives, as well as DP and the LEA so there has been a consensus on the best shape for Promise Mk 4 "*

4. Workforce Remodelling

The latest newsletter from the Devon/national remodelling team (Winter 04) was circulated. It focused on 10% PPA time for teachers which comes into effect Sept. 05.

- Issues raised by governors at the meetings:
 - Sustainability: can it be continued over several years? *The Devon Remodelling Team (DRT) comments: "PPA plans can and should be reviewed. This will ensure that any developments in staffing structures, and cultural perceptions over roles and responsibilities, the implications of falling roles etc. can be built into the planning. Contractual issues relating to enabling flexibility of staffing should be addressed through the school's link personnel officer. "*
 - Parents have concerns over who is taking the class - are they qualified? *DRT: " Those who have achieved HLTA status have provided evidence that they meet 31 exacting National Standards. The assessment tasks they undertake as part of their HLTA work are assessed by external assessors and are then subject to local and national moderation. The reason for this is to give governors, parents and teachers reassurance that those with the status are operating at this level. Importantly, HLTA status is not for all teaching assistants – it is only for those operating at that 'higher level.' "*
 - Where can teachers go during their PPA time - many schools do not have a spare room. The toilet!? *DRT: " The headteacher can direct the Teacher to take PPA time off the school premises if it is thought to be desirable. "*
 - Examples of ways to achieve PPA time were given at the meetings, including use of peripatetic Sports, Music Arts teachers (however rural areas and small schools are finding it difficult to find suitably qualified people such as sports coaches), use of specialist teachers from local colleges (collaboration with colleges and other schools can be very beneficial for all parties), use of PGCE students and HLTAs (Higher Level Teaching Assistants). Here a question of pay was raised - should HLTAs be paid the same rate as teachers? *DRT: " Proposed grading for an HLTA role, put forward to Unions, is scale 5 APCT. "*
 - Some schools wish to keep smaller class sizes and so they are cutting back on other services in order to fund the 10% time. Small schools find it difficult to deliver the Literacy & Numeracy strategies as they have large mixed age classes, and so choose to employ extra teaching time in order to benefit the children. They do not want to lose these teaching hours and would rather cut back on other services in order to carry out PPA.
 - Part time staff - if a teacher's hours are very small (say .1), they will need to take PPA over a two week period as there is a minimum requirement of half an hour at a time. *DRT: "In these circumstances it is possible to aggregate PPA time and structure it at less frequent, but regular intervals by negotiation. "*
 - Training - rural schools felt that too much training was Exeter based - difficult for Governors in some areas, especially in the evening. One suggestion was to make more of use of modern technology and to look into the possibility of e-conferencing. Ivan will pass this on to DGS.
 - Most concern was raised by small schools who felt PPA would be difficult to carry out satisfactorily, partly through finances and partly through the difficulty of finding people to cover for teachers. However, the initiative is being funded with an addition to the school's budget and hopefully schools will be able to collaborate and share good practice in order to make the scheme work. Governors also need to look at the Headteacher's Work/Life balance when thinking about PPA & WR.
 - There is a statutory obligation to deliver PPA in Sept 05.
 - For more help on all aspects of WR look at www.devon.gov.uk/dcs/improve/remodel .
- NASG comment " This is not just a Devon issue. We have letters in April GN which mirror the above and the TES has had numerous letters of a similar nature. "*

Jean McEntire (Chief Executive Officer NGC) comments “ NGC will be taking part in a debate about Workforce Remodelling at a Local Government Chronicle Conference in April. The focus is on changes beyond September 2005 and the issues are:

- how LEAs can make improvements happen and provide support to schools.
- how the workforce agreement might meet the needs of extended schools?
- how progress will be monitored and used to improve school performance.
- long term planning – best practice for staffing schools creatively.

NGC would welcome governor views on any of these matters by the end of March please. Regardless of this deadline, thoughts on remodelling are welcome at any time as we meet regularly with WAMG and the National Remodelling Team to represent governors' views. “

5. Vision for Education/Education Bill

Devon's Vision for Learning will be affected by the new Education Bill. All children's services will be brought together under one umbrella and Devon will be producing a short term plan to take this into account for the 05/06 year.

6. Admission arrangements

For the next academic year (05/06), Devon will be dealing with all admissions to Primary schools (previously schools dealt with their own admissions). There was some confusion over the primary admissions. How do parents get hold of the booklet containing the application form? Are private nurseries sent the booklet as well as pre-schools?

Vicky Rollason (LEA Group Manager for School Organisation and Access) comments: “ The Coordinated Scheme for Primary schools will take effect at the beginning of the round for admissions in September 2006. The DfES allowed a year's grace beyond the originally suggested 2005-6. The Local Admissions' Forum had the scheme at their meeting on 23 November 2004, and agreed a 2006 implementation date. The details are available on the website http://www.devon.gov.uk/index/learning/schools/admissions_transfers.htm where we have been consulting on 2006 arrangements since the beginning of February.

In a nutshell: parents will have the prospectus "First Step" and application/preference form early Autumn Term (via the LEA, schools, pre-schools, GP surgeries etc, as now). They will be able to put two schools, in order of preference. They should return the form to the school (the one they've put first) by 20 January 2006. The schools will send us all the forms by 28 January. We will then send (by 14 Feb) to VA GBs their list of applicants, for their Admissions Committee to put in order of their admissions criteria (we will process the Community and VC). VA GBs should send us their ordered lists by 7 March. Then on 31 March, parents will have a letter from us offering them a place (those letters will be on behalf of the Governing Body if it is a VA).

We will let schools know just before then of the list of offers made for their school.

Because of the requirements of a coordinated scheme, LEAs must undertake the processing overall: it could be seen as a reduction in the admin burden for schools!

This year's secondary coordinated scheme has hit all deadlines, and the offer letters went out on March 1st - National Allocation Day. “

7. Portfolio of Services

Schools will be offered an alternative list of providers in the future, and this will include non-County services. Governors were asked to consider if choosing a non-County service whether this will be sustainable and of a high enough quality. Governors were reminded that they must buy into certain things such as Legal cover.

Ray Beale (LEA Head of Client Services) comments: “ Progress is being made and a paper is being presented to the corporate management board. In addition, we are having discussions with other SW authorities on these issues. The Brokerage Group of heads/officers will discuss the progress at their next meeting and a report will be sent to the School Services Support Board. “

8. DGS Website

The DGS website (www.devon.gov.uk/governors) has a new webforum discussion board and this could be a useful way for governors to share ideas and recommendations.

Q. Will the webforum have a 'topic search' capability?

Sam Freeman (LEA Web Development Officer) comments “ There is a form of search for topics. Near the top of the page, on the right hand side, there should be a link called Search. In there it is possible to select the forum you wish to search in and then various other options. “

9. Abolition of the Annual meeting for Parents

At previous DAG area meetings there was a general feeling that the annual meeting for parents was not satisfactory as so few parents attended. Present regulations stipulate that the meeting only needs to be held if the parents of 15 or more children request it. The new Bill proposes one step further by taking away the obligation altogether (this does not prevent governing bodies from holding a meeting through choice). Some governors were concerned that the annual parents' meeting was a 'safety net' for parents if they had real issues to address. It was noted that Ofsted conducts its own parents' meetings, although this would not be as often as once a year. Some schools have regular 'governors' surgeries' or are available at parent/teacher evenings.

There are many ways in which governors can communicate with parents and ongoing contact throughout the year should be encouraged in order to allay any concerns.

NASG comment: "In the new Ofsted framework there is no obligation for inspectors to meet with parents either singly or at a meeting. An additional concern is that the new School Profile which replaces the Governors' Report might not contain any information about the governors' contribution. We wait to see how useful this document will be to parents! "

10. Communication between governors

Ways in which governors can share ideas and communicate were discussed. Secondary school governors asked if DAG could create a network for secondary school governors on its website. The idea was broadened to include examples of how governing bodies and committees are set up and run. If you have any ideas about how to develop / extend such a scheme please contact Ivan Godfrey.

Sam Freeman: "I imagine we can do this with not much trouble as I assume you are proposing a page of documents on various topics such as the organisation of Governing Bodies. We are currently in the process of transferring the DAG site over to the new website before the old server gets turned off, though, so whatever is required will need to sit under that new system! This might limit our ability to meet certain requirements initially. However, I'm sure we can find a suitable workaround or compromise! "

I should like to use this opportunity to record my thanks to Sam and his team for the excellent work they perform on maintaining and updating the DAG website.

11. Catering

Governors should look out for the consultation on catering when it is raised - Headteachers have this on their agenda.

Ray Beale: "The LEA is currently consulting schools on the future of school dinners prior to putting a proposal to the Schools Forum. Up to 20 pilot schools are being identified by which the county standard and Health Group recommendations can be tested. "

12. DAG Annual Assembly

Saturday 16th April, County Hall, Exeter. Information has been sent to all schools. Deborah Magill, Deputy Director for Education will speak about how governors can/should play a role in the shared agenda of school improvement and leadership and how governors will play a key role in influencing the overall education of young people in the context of Devon's Vision for Learning and the government's Education Bill.

13. Devon Governor Services and Devon Association of Governors will be holding a joint conference on 14th/15th October 2005 - 'Every Child Matters'.

14. Teachers TV

24 hour television channel was launched (on digital only) in February, and there have been programmes for governors called "Just for Governors". Ivan Godfrey will be pleased to hear your comments. Have you been able to access the programmes? Are they of value?

15. Reconstitution

This is a fairly straightforward process and a good time to carry it out is when you have spaces on your governing body. Try to avoid a governing body with an odd number - this helps with your quorum.

16. Annual Review Visits/ School Self-Evaluation

These are moving more towards self evaluation and hopefully the ongoing nature of self-evaluation will mean that schools will be prepared when Ofsted give 48 hour notice.

Roger Fetherston (Head of Devon Curriculum Services) comments “ We are going to put on courses in the summer for schools to help them do their self evaluations and I will feed back all the information I have following guidance from Ofsted expected soon. “

Ivan Godfrey adds: “ I attended a recent meeting of governors with a senior HMI in Birmingham about the changes to OFSTED and the role of the self-evaluation process. Some of the key points to emerge were:

- there are planned radical changes to inspection process which will be based more on examining whether a school is doing what it claims to be doing on its Self-Evaluation Form (SEF) than on class visits
- governors are more likely to be involved with school's self-evaluation process than meetings with inspectors
- it will be crucially important for schools to provide evidence of self-evaluation statements
- there will be a value in schools / governors continually seeking community feedback (e.g. parental questionnaires a matter of course)
- it will be important for all those involved in a school to own / be aware of school's self-evaluation statements
- it will probably be wise to update the SEF on a termly basis

Our Governing Body (together with senior staff) recently had an in-service training session on the role of the GB in Self-Evaluation (linked to one of the Teachers' TV television programmes for governors). This was led, at the suggestion of Judy Burgess, by Kath Oram. I am very happy to recommend the training as an invaluable opportunity for governors and staff to work together, to build on existing strengths and to plot out realistic steps forward to enable the GB to play a full role in this self-evaluation process – something which, I believe, will become the central element of the work of Governing Bodies in the future.

For further details about the training please contact Kath Oram at oram@globalnet.co.uk . “

17. Adult and Community Learning

All local advisory committees have to be chaired by a governor. This is being reviewed substantially and comments / questions / input should be sent to Debbie Pritchard.

Debbie Pritchard (LEA Group Manager Extended Learning) comments: “ I am working with Roger Kirk (Chair of Devon Association of Secondary Heads) on the establishment of a working party to make sure that we get this working. I think it is bigger than community colleges and bigger than just heads so will try to ensure that governors are involved. The partnership with schools is a key aspect. “ A letter giving a further update on the steps the authority is taking has been sent to all Principals and Chairs of Governors of Community Colleges earlier this month. We are promised more updates including information as to how the debate on this aspect will be taken forward.

18. Polling Stations

Some schools have concerns over this, as it can be disruptive. There is an expectation on them to become polling stations particularly in small rural areas where there is little alternative.

NASG comment: “ We have heard of problems where governors lobbied hard on the grounds of Health and Safety – and other accommodation was found. Local churches are good! “

19. Clerks

Governing bodies should be aware of how many hours their clerk is doing and make sure their job description specifies whether this includes committee meetings and other tasks such as the annual report.

20. Term Structure

There was a renewed call for the LEA to look into a review of the school year. This was proposed a couple of years ago and heavily turned down. The problem this year is that Easter is very early and has made an unusually short spring term. It makes it difficult for schools to plan curriculum and exams. If governors felt strongly enough about this it could be raised again. Ivan Godfrey will ask if county could devise a few models for governors to look at, and raise the question nationally with NGC/NASG.

21. Headteacher appointments

One school has recently appointed a Headteacher successfully, but found the process very bureaucratic.

NASG comment: " We are not sure what you mean but certainly a proper process should be followed and a full record of proceedings must be kept. This is for governors' own protection.

Jane Phillips (former Chair of NASG) has just published a book entitled ' Recruitment and Selection - a practical guide for school governors and headteachers '. This book provides support and advice in making school appointments. It explains the principles behind making any staff appointment, with particular reference to those of the headteacher or deputy, lays out step by step the procedures that have to be followed in appointing a head or deputy, shows how best to assess exactly how the candidates meet your requirements, includes various documents that can be adapted for your own use, including the job description, person specification, advert, applicants' pack and forms for assessing candidates in the interview and their presentation. These documents are also available in rewritable form on CD-ROM for a small extra charge. The book an A4 paperback of 48 pages costs £7.50 (£11.50 with CD-ROM) plus £1.25 postage and packing and is available from Adamson Publishing Akeman House High Street Stretham Ely Cambs CB6 3JQ tel: 01353 649238 fax: 01353 648184 e-mail: sales@adamsonbooks.com www.adamsonbooks.com "

22. Policies

A request was made to the LEA to make all model policies in the same format.

23. Ivan Godfrey will be away for the second half of the summer term. Alternative arrangements will be made for governors to contact DAG. He and his wife Sue will be undertaking a 2 month long 500+ mile walk along the Pyrenean mountains in the summer (doing the equivalent of climbing Mt. Everest from sea level nearly 6 times in the process!!). In doing so, they are raising money for Hospiscare and Children's Hospice SW. If you or your school would like to support / sponsor them in any way, please contact Ivan for a form or visit the following website for details - www.hospiscare-devon.org.uk/fundraising.htm

Thanks to Chulmleigh CC, King Edward VI CC, Totnes and Bridestowe Primary School for hosting the meetings.

Please note that there will be no Area Meetings early next term as there are already Link Governor Meetings and the DAG Annual Assembly planned. The meetings originally planned for next term will now take place early in the Autumn term. Full details will be sent out in May.