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Southwest Region

Newsletter June 2008

Firstly, on a personal note, my apologies for not being as active as I might / should have been lately. Over the last few months I have encountered some particularly difficult personal challenges and it's been a difficult time, hopefully now past. For those of you to whom it applies, my very grateful thanks for your help and / or forbearance – it's very helpful. To misquote a popular aphorism – 'Life is what happens when you need to spend time on governance.'

So to business – I'm sorry there's a lot, but I'm behind, and there's a huge amount happening which is affecting and will continue to affect all of us as governors.

1. Regional role.

As discussed in previous meetings, the regional NGA role continues to evolve and develop. A great deal has been done internally within the NGA following the merger and appointment of a new CEO, but this is largely complete and with a clearer set of policies and approaches it's time to be much more outward-looking.

Many organisations affect school governance, and are seeking to change its nature and practice. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but governors are THE most important part of all this, and it's vital that we play a full and active part – if we don't control our (governing) destiny, then somebody else will do it for us.

We must also be realistic in our expectations – NGA resources are strictly limited both financially and in terms of people's time – we do have staff but they are frantically busy, and a huge amount of work is still carried out on an unpaid voluntary basis by the board (well, this IS school governance!).

Many of you are talking about pressures from governance in all the areas in which you're involved, and Regional issues have the potential to add more work. I'm keen that any NGA activity provides support, not burden, but the nature of that support must be defined by you, the members.

Unfortunately I do need input from you, so I'll be asking you for things from time to time. So, following the priorities identified in the last two regional meetings, this newsletter contains actions I'd like members to carry out to help with this.

2. Regional perspective.

Based on the feedback from the last two regional meetings and some priorities which have emerged from Board activity, the following is a list of Regional Priorities (detail follows in subsequent sections).

2.1 Funding – concern over the general low level of funding to SW authorities and schools.

2.2 Training – concern over general levels and standards, but also part of the response to the government's Review of Governance.

2.3 Government Office for the South West (GOSW) – GOSW has an important set of roles across the region, particularly in responding to government initiatives and policies around ECM, the Children's Plan and vulnerable children.

2.4 Review of governance – concern over changing roles and expectations of governors, as evidenced by the government's full if not comprehensive review of governance.

2.5 Enablement of all governors, governing bodies and associations.

It's important to develop an overall regional perspective, and to that end over the next 6 months I'd like to get around the region as much as possible, to meet as many members and learn as much of your strengths and problems as I can. Although I glean some information from meeting some of you, getting out to your meetings can give me a wider steer not only on regional activities, but can be fed back into NGA Policy group, on which I sit, and the wider board for any of the national consultations and working groups in which we are engaged.

Did you know – NGA board members and employees regularly represent our members' views in over 40 government bodies and groups which affect governance – just at National level?

As part of building a bigger picture, I'd like to contact COGS in those Authority areas where I have not yet done so. It would help me if members can let me know what sort of support and working relationship they enjoy – all comments will be held in the strictest confidence.

What members can do:

invite me to conferences, meetings, even exec meetings. I'm happy to just listen, or if you want me to earn my keep I'm happy to address a gathering on any topic you need, from what NGA is doing to aspects of National policy and how they will affect the changing roles of governors.

Tell me what sort of support you get from your Local Authority, what's good, what's missing. What the local authority governor services sets as its priorities for you.

2.1 Funding

For many of you, the biggest single worry is the overall low level of education funding across the region, and the negative effects it's having in some of our schools. Over the past few weeks I've discussed with many people what might be done on a regional level, and there are few practical options.

There are no regional funding mechanisms which we can realistically influence. The current Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) allocations to local authorities are based not on an objective formula, but on historical spending patterns from 2005-06.

Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) Formula Review

Government has recognised that the method of calculating DSG must change and is currently leading a review of the formula by which schools have funding allocated, and the aim is to develop a single, transparent formula that will be available for use in distributing the DSG to local authorities from 2011 to 2012.

The development phase of the review started in February 2008 and will continue until late 2009, with consultation on specific proposals in early 2010. Ministers will announce broad decisions from the review in summer 2010.

NGA is represented on the consultation body by two board members, Leslie Stout (London Region) and Geoff Rawnsley-Powis, who keep an eye on the development of the review, and will flag up any issues to the NGA board for the wider involvement of members.

The next point at which detailed input will be needed is the response to specific proposals in early 2010, but we as NGA will seek to make sure that governor's views are taken into account in the development of the review process leading to that point. We will certainly be back to members to help formulate a stance on both the mechanisms for allocation and amounts which will come to authorities in the South West.

(n.b. In case some of you are confused, recent requests for feedback which you may have seen were for F40 members only.)

Stay in touch with the process at:

<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/schoolfunding/DSGformulareview/>

The Programme of Work, published in February 2008 and updated in May, can be found at <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/docbank/index.cfm?id=12502>

F40

For those of you who may not know, f40 is an organisation which represents a group of the poorest funded education authorities in England where government-set cash allocations for primary and secondary pupils are the lowest in the country. This applies to most of the Authorities in the Southwest Region, but only Gloucestershire, South Gloucestershire, North Somerset and Dorset are members.

Visit the F40 web site: <http://www.f40.org.uk/>

See F40's pages on the DSG Review on <http://www.f40.org.uk/f40/Formula%20review.htm>

See F40's link to the Conference held in May 2008 here
http://www.f40.org.uk/executive_meetings/national_conference08.htm

An NGA note on this conference is available for those who are interested – please contact me.

The South West's link with F40 is Gillian Hayward, Chair, Gloucestershire Schools Forum, who sits on the F40 executive. NGA policy officer. Gillian Windass attended the F40 Conference and keeps NGA in touch with developments. F40 is also active in keeping an eye on the DSG Review process, but there is something we can do to help. According to Gillian Hayward, the more LAs who join F40, the greater the organisation's voice will be, so NGA members should encourage their LA to join. If any LA officer would like to contact a senior officer in an F40 authority, the contact details of the Directors of Education, or equivalent, in F40 Local Education Authorities are here:
<http://www.f40.org.uk/contacts/f40%20Directors%20of%20Education.xls>

If any member enters into talks along these lines, please let me know of the outcomes.

General Awareness of levels of funding

The NGA, local associations, governing bodies and individual governors can all respond about changes to the calculation of DSG when the formal consultation is announced. Members can also write to their local and national politicians about the review of DSG.

Clearly the overall level of DSG is the key part of the equation, but how funds are distributed at the local level is also important. In most local authorities there is some governor representation on the schools forum, which provides a mechanism for influencing local decision making on education spending. If there is no governor representation on your schools forum please let me know.

What members can do:

Send me information about governor representation on your schools forum.

Let me know if there are any funding issues specific to your locality.

Lobby your Local Authority to join F40 (it should cost them around £2000).

Send me any ideas/avenues you have for publicising educational issues such as this, and whether your association would be interested in a joint NGA/association statement/view.

2.2 Training

The March regional meeting was useful in confirming the views of Regional governors towards some key aspects of governor training, particularly those which the Government in its Review of Governance seems keen to press forward.

These include: mandatory induction and Chair of Governors' training, smaller governing bodies (!), a commitment to fund ongoing training, issues around quality assurance.

These have been passed back to NGA Chair, Judith Bennett, who represents NGA on the Ministerial Advisory Group on Governance (see section 2.4).

A separate initiative on governor training is possible via the policy group and NGA board, of which more next newsletter.

2.3 Government Office South West (GOSW)

Following on from discussions I held with GOSW last year and earlier this, GOSW is now more aware of the need to include governors in aspects of its work across the region.

As far as education is concerned, GOSW's activities are primarily related to the effectiveness of mainstream government policies as they affect child wellbeing (Children's Plan, Every Child Matters) and less the mainline 'academic' standards (Ofsted country). Through a system of Service Advisors and a Children's Services Field Force they challenge Local Authorities, mainly through the Directors of Children's Services, and 'key organisations'. These include organisations with wider but complimentary community interests, such as Youth Trust, Youth Justice Board, Training & Development Agency, Teenage Pregnancy Coordinators etc. which will be of great interest to those of you who are starting to look at issues around governance of collaborative / community activities.

They also look at a cluster of issues around:

- Health and wellbeing, including emotional and mental health;
- Obesity
- Play
- Teenage pregnancy

- Extended services
- Childcare
- Early intervention and Children's Centres
- Youth engagement – training, employment, 14-19 Curriculum
- Behaviour and attendance

It is my objective that NGA and its constituent members become a 'key organisation' in this respect, since so much of our work lies in holding responsibility for the overall wellbeing of children and young people in our institutions.

NGA South West can work with GOSW on the following:

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1. Brief GOSW on the outcomes of national policies as they directly affect children, schools and governing bodies; i.e. feed back our experiences.
 2. work with GOSW to use this to influence the development of policy at the centre (i.e. National Government) with a regional as opposed to a National perspective;.
 3. Engage on specific issues by providing input to strategic groups;
 4. Participate in key GOSW Regional events.

I will be working with GOSW over the coming weeks to flesh out these ideas and to establish the best mechanisms for bringing this about, and will be seeking members' input. In the meantime, it would be useful to gain a view from members of what capacity exists to service this opportunity – we all have busy schedules.

It is my intention to use this avenue to make representations on the results of low funding across the region generally – make sure you feed back your info so I can build a case – see funding section above.

Since GOSW has an active Field Force in this area, I have asked that GOSW feed back on GB involvement / effectiveness. This will help to build a more objective awareness of GB effectiveness to inform our understanding of where issues may lie with governor training and performance.

For an idea of who GOSW Key Partners are see the GOSW website:
<http://www.gosw.gov.uk/>

For the full Children's Plan see:
http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/childrensplan/downloads/The_Childrens_Plan.pdf

I'll be considering aspects of the Children's Plan impact on governance in the next newsletter.

What members can do:

Identify broad areas of difficulty encountered in schools / by GBs, and the area of Government policy or directive which brings this about.

Think about how best to collect information from Governing bodies on outcomes of specific educational and social policies.

Identify capacity available to engage with GOSW events – is there anyone who can contribute time to representing South West governors in this area?

2.4 Review of Governance.

The March regional meeting tasked me with obtaining NGA guidance on governing body roles which needed to be covered (meeting minutes 3 d)).

I'm pursuing that, but that conversation is being rapidly overtaken by the much louder one, led by government, which is seeking to examine governance as a whole. I would argue that

this is a useful exercise – we must constantly challenge governance if it is to develop and improve – but hardly helpful in addressing role ambiguities which exist now.

Initial consultations on the nature of Governance in which NGA have been involved have broadened into a full-blown Ministerial Stakeholder Group reviewing governance, led by Schools Minister Jim Knight.

NGA Chair Judith Bennett and vice-chair Stephen Adamson are members of this group, (as some of you may know, NGA felt that the original one place was under-representative of governors, and obtained a second after lobbying the minister – well done Judith & co.). Associated working groups meet and are attended by other NGA board members, usually vice-chairs, as appropriate.

The DCSF press release announcing the first meeting of the Ministerial Stakeholder Group on governance can be found via the link below.

http://www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2008_0085

The NGA's response can be found via the link below.

<http://www.nga.org.uk/news.aspx>

The Minister's Group is likely to put together proposals which will come to wider consultation in "the autumn". NGA will of course keep you informed, and make sure the fullest possible representation is made to the government. In the meantime, members might like to think about the most appropriate mechanism for consulting with your own members / colleagues to determine what that representation will be. I would be happy to discuss the possibility of co-hosted events which can explore the issues raised and our collective responses to them. Note that we will not be aware of specific proposals until later this year, but we must be ready to respond rapidly – in the characteristic fashion of this administration, we will not be given much time to respond.

There has been a lot of activity in this arena lately, not least the Children's Services Network (CSN)/ NGA conference 'Refocusing the role of governors', held in London on 2nd June and which I attended on behalf of the Region.

To encapsulate key arguments: the government wants governance to make a bigger contribution to raising school standards, to develop the concept of the 21st Century school which is "intolerant of failure", so is looking at quite radical approaches.

Quite right too: Look at the keynote presentations (including that from schools minister Jim Knight) on the CSN website:

http://www.csn.info/csn/module1-detail.jsp?section=what_we_do_csn&id=54

The collective view of NGA is that the system itself basically isn't broken. It can meet a wide variety of needs, especially that for having a strong community stakeholder representation, if it is properly resourced and applied – the implication being, I suppose, that it isn't at the moment. (Replies on a postcard please.....).

We also have difficulties in accepting the somewhat less than fulsome or objective research on which government reasoning is based. A number of NGA board members are seeking clarification, where it exists.

Since this newsletter is so large, I'll report back more fully on this topic in the next one, but leave you with the response of the schools minister to one question. The answers were characteristically general, but highly significant:

When asked how to address a big diversity of educational provision with a basic level of [governor] job knowledge, he replied:

- GBs need to look at the needs of the organization as a whole;
- Funding will play an important part;
- GBs must work with COGS and the support available;
- GBs must work with Ofsted on the inspection of governance, including training and materials.

And most significantly: [with regard to the level of training to do the job]: "It is up to GBs how they get to that level".

So the message is clear: we must define our own training needs, and determine how to meet them.

To this end, I've raised the issue with the Policy Group, and am preparing an outline proposal for that group to discuss.

I'll be approaching members shortly for your views, but that comes next newsletter – I've given you (and me) enough to do for the moment.

What members can do:

Identify events or dates to discuss and explore ramifications of the government's expected proposals for review / refocusing of governance.

There is the possibility of using the NGA Regional meeting of 4th October for this.

Longer term: think about who determines the content of your governor training, and whether it meets your needs.

2.5 Enablement of all governors, governing bodies and associations.

There has been little opportunity to directly address this area, but in many ways all the activities above do so.

It is important that NGA understands HOW best to help members, and for that we need your input.

There are difficulties in just defining what constitutes effective governance, far less what helps to establish it, but that's at the root of the Government's review of governance and what the NGA, mainly through the Policy Group, is seeking to establish. We certainly need to avoid re-inventing the wheel with regard to training and development, and this cuts across many areas of NGA activity.

What members can do:

Let me know (if not already covered in your feedback to previous sections) where you perceive difficulties and barriers to effective governance, and how you see NGA helping you to overcome these.

Members in areas without an association:

Although Associations elect the Regional Director, I represent ALL NGA members in the Region, so I'd like to hear from you. We regard it as vital that all governing bodies belong to an independent association, which can provide impartial information, guidance and support – governance can be a lonely existence, but there are 300,000 (government estimates vary!) others just like you and someone, somewhere, has solved the problem which is bothering you.

Although the NGA does not set up area or authority-based groups we will help you to set up an independent Association – any member is welcome to contact me in the first instance to discuss your ideas / issues.

What members can do:

Email me a contact point, let me know who you are, where you are, what you do and whether you think there may be enough interest in your Local Authority to form an Association of Governors.

If your association is not an NGA member, I'd happy to talk to you about membership and how it might benefit us both.

Clarification:

Lastly – the importance of understanding who writes the information you read. I am indebted to Carole Thomson of Oxfordshire Governors' Association for succinctly pointing this out in a recent posting on NGA-Assocs:

“You will have recently received a copy of ‘Governors’ the magazine from the government Department for Children, Schools and Families. The first article entitled Future Vision ends with a quote from the National Governors’ Association.

“The NGA does not see the proposal to reduce the size of governing bodies as a threat – many governing bodies could be smaller without becoming less effective”. **This is not so much a misquote as a complete fabrication.** “

NGA members, not least those in South West Region, maintain that the size of governing body should be determined by the governing body itself, since it knows better than anyone else the workload it needs to address. Be assured that this is well understood by NGA and is part of the message which our representatives deliver as part of their input to the governance review.

The NGA's stance on this was issued by Phil Revell (see NGA website www.nga.org.uk News section)

“There is clear evidence that there is a relationship between good governance and pupils’ achievements, the quality of teaching, as well as the quality of leadership and management.”

The NGA is not opposed to the idea of change; we recognise that some governing bodies struggle with their role and others could be reduced in size without any loss of effectiveness.

But, as far as the NGA is aware, there is no recent research that supports the view that smaller governing bodies are more effective; neither is there any recent research to show that governing bodies are failing in their task.

We are concerned about the apparent direction of government policy in this area and about the evidence base that ministers are using for policy formation.”

The lesson here:

There is a constant stream of information coming from the government, DCSF, NCOGS and other organisations which inevitably carries that source’s bias, conscious or otherwise. Whilst it is usually useful, we must be aware of the perspective of that source – as governors our interests are not necessarily those of our informants’.

Make sure you are objectively informed.

(NGA Assocs is the NGA email-based discussion forum – if you’re not on it, make sure you register. You don’t have to post comments, but you will be able to read comments from other governors around the country on a range of topical governance issues.)

What members can do:

Send an email to me or Gillian Windass at NGA HQ and ask to be put on the NGA Assocs mailing list. Gillian.Windass@nga.org.uk

Next Newsletter:

Far, FAR too much going on to cover it all in this letter (it’s probably too large anyway), so next time I’ll cover:

- The Children’s Services Network (CSN)/ NGA conference ‘Refocusing the role of governors’, held in London on 2nd June. Several very interesting subjects raised for governors to think about (as if we need more!) and Jim Knight’s speech and answers to questions.
- Children’s Plan – the implications for Governance, and who is looking at them.
- NGA Policy group – outline of what we’re working on and why. To stay abreast of NGA policies, or to suggest what we might need to look at, check out the NGA policy register online: <http://www.nga.org.uk/policies.aspx>
- NASUWT conference motion – regional response. The UK’s largest teaching union has some interesting views on the effectiveness of governors. Do we need to respond?
- Governance in community groups? Addressed generally in the CSN Conference, this is an area of growing interest for governors, as collaborative working is becoming a mainstay of government policy on education and wider social issues.

What members can do:

If there are any issues you'd like reported on / discussed in the next newsletter, let me know.

For your diary –

Saturday 4th October 2008 NGA South West Regional Meeting – 10 am – 3 pm
including light lunch. Taunton. Venue details to follow.
Saturday 8th November 2008 NGA AGM Cumberland Hotel, London.

What members can do:

If any Members would like to publicise their events in this (or any other NGA publication) please let me know – we'd be only too happy to oblige. Similarly, it would be nice to include reports of events which have taken place.

Thanks for reading this far (if you have).

Best wishes and Happy Governing,

Mark Hlland

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