

LDEA School Governance Working Group

The Liberal Democrat Education Association's Working Group on School Governance is still in action. It is moving towards a final report and motion to our September Federal Conference in Birmingham. Andrew Bridgwater is the Chair of the Working Group. This is his update.

School Governance – shared strategic leadership

Andrew Bridgwater

We are working on our final statement of principles to define good school governance. Included in that statement will be the prime 'support with challenge' role of school Governing Bodies in acting as a scrutiny body for their school and a recognition of the strategic decisions for which a Governing Body should be responsible.

We have also determined that we need to differentiate between issues that require National Government action - as opposed to matters to be determined by Local Government - as well as Governing Bodies themselves recognising that we now have a stronger potential to influence Government policy than in the past, when we were in opposition. We reassert that the vast majority of Governing Bodies and Local Authorities have our trust to make the right local decisions appropriate to their own circumstances.

We have had considerable dialogue over the critically important issue of training in achieving good standards of governance. We have concluded that there must be some mandatory induction training within the first year of appointment/election as a School Governor and similarly after election as a Chair, Vice-Chair or Committee Chair.

We have received evidence from external bodies including NGA, NCOGS, Modern Governor, CASE, NUT and ASCL. All of them support the stakeholder model of Governing Bodies, which we too have concluded that we should continue to support. We have more closely defined the roles of Local Authority and Community Governor, whilst not proposing any change to the methods of appointment or election.

In order to ensure local democratic accountability we have determined that no stakeholder group in any publicly funded school should have an overall majority on a Governing Body before or after the appointment of Community Governors. This has profound implications on the governance of academy schools, to which I refer later. We also propose that the exact composition of Governing Bodies should be determined by themselves, save that each stakeholder category must be represented, and on the basis that the Headteacher is a separate category. Whilst the need to have skills sets is accepted we believe that the way to achieve them is significantly through training, as well as any existing skills potential Governors may have.

The particular difficulties of Staff, including Headteacher, Governors were reviewed. We felt that some element of self-governance from this group helped the dynamics of Governing Bodies, but that there needed to be more clarity on the separation of the professional and governance roles of Staff Governors. This could be through adding a larger governance module in the NPQH, and specifically designed training for other Staff Governors. Critically this group should refer to the Chair of Governors on governance issues and the Headteacher on professional matters. We are proposing, however, that the sub groups of Teacher and Non-teacher Staff Governors should be removed.

We are proposing that there should be mandatory training of Clerks, with accreditation, to be completed within their first year of appointment, failing which their contract would be automatically terminated. Whilst discouraging the appointment of the Clerk from amongst the school staff, all Clerk appointments must be made by the Governing Body. Furthermore, the Clerk must be clearly accountable to the Chair of Governors on all governance matters.

The difficult issues of academy and free school governance to ensure local democratic accountability is one that we are still considering. This revolves around their current governance model, which incorporates the school as a Charitable Trust, requiring the parallel formation of a Limited Company. It is then that the largely unaccountable trustees appoint the Governing Body. Our objective is therefore to remove charitable status, brought in by the last Labour Government when they were seeking sponsorship money, so that we could institute the same, or very similar, means of appointment and election as in other schools.

A further safeguard would be to introduce reserve powers to require all publicly funded schools situated within a Local Authority area to be required to attend scrutiny meetings. This will help scrutinise local issues, perhaps raised through Local Authority Governors, including schools that are causing concern. It follows that existing powers given to Local Authorities to appoint Additional Governors, and in extreme cases appoint Interim Executive Boards, should be extended to academies and free schools within their areas.

All the above changes are compatible with Michael Gove's reported desire that all publicly funded schools should be part of the community of schools in their area. Consequentially, this does involve transferring some powers of the Secretary of State to Local Authorities in line with the Coalition Government's localism agenda.

The remaining, but important, issue on the composition of Governing Bodies is the potential role of pupils and students. We believe that a Governing Body should be able to institute a Student Governor stakeholder category for those aged 16 or over, and be able to appoint younger pupils as Associate Governors with limited powers determined by the Governing Body. In any event we wish to encourage the pupil and student voice on Governing Bodies by encouraging stronger links with School Councils.

The dual priorities on which we have been working are

- strengthening the role of School Governance, and
- ensuring the democratic accountability of School Governing Bodies to local stakeholders and to the electorate generally.

Andrew Bridgwater is Chair of the LDEA School Governance Working Group, Vice-Chair of LDEA and Vice-Chair of Devon and Cornwall Regional Party

Reflections on government

John Howson

Being in government is normally an easy ride for Party members. Policies devised when in opposition are put into effect; there should be little more to do than monitor their successful outcomes and how they improve the state of society. Well, that's the theory at least. But, as we all know, there are two big differences about the present situation and that theory of government: the economy, and the fact that there is a coalition government.

The economy is the easy one to handle. Remember the note David Laws found: cash box empty. That says it all about the spendthrift nature of the last Labour Government's final years, when prudence had given way to a mixture of extravagance and economic mayhem across the Western world. That LibDems have been able to ensure that the Pupil Premium remained a part of the in-coming coalition government's programme, and the fact that the schools' part of the education budget escaped the worst of the deep cuts experienced by many parts of government, is another outcome that might not have happened under a Conservative or Labour majority government.

But, coalition means there isn't a majority for any one Party. As the smaller Party in the coalition we cannot expect everything we want by way of policy. Many councillors who have been in coalitions are aware of the difficult decisions that joint working requires, some of which are played out in the blaze of local publicity. However, there comes a point where a line is crossed.

Last year, our Liverpool Conference made clear its views on retaining local involvement in our school system in the face of a Secretary of State who wants to create a National School System along the lines of the National Health Service, where consumer demands are satisfied by providers with a direct responsibility to Westminster. The 2010 Academy Act was the first stage; the 2011 Education Bill is the second step on this road, and the national funding formula, together with the Pupil Premium now leave Local Authorities with responsibilities but little or no power over funding, organisation or even admissions, let alone pay or working conditions and the curriculum for schools in their area.

This is the record we as Liberal Democrats will have to defend at the next general election - and motivate activists to work for. Axing many of these activists from their role as Local Authority Governors is surely not a great motivational tool for those interested in service to their community. But, no doubt, The Big Society will offer them other alternatives. As a Party that grew from its local campaigning roots we dismantle that base at our peril, as both the other major Parties have discovered.

A credible case can be made for keeping education up to the age of eleven in local hands, since most schools face the same tasks, and few children at that age travel any distance to school. This would mean a clear role for health and schooling at district council level with a return to detailed local planning to cope with school rolls, whether increasing or in decline. It would allow issues such as employment, and its effects on working parents, as well as health and other services, to be judged for the benefit of the whole community and not just the immediate consumer, whose economic and social purchasing power can differ even within a relatively small area.

Finally, a word about Higher Education. I am personally sorry that, having signed the pledge on tuition fees, our Party didn't stick to the manifesto policy, whatever its fundamental merits. If doing so would have meant the Conservatives would have dissolved the coalition, even if we had supported them in any subsequent confidence vote, then the Party should have been told this was a deal-breaker right from the start.

Higher Education is a complex area that is increasingly global in nature, and I fear that during the years between now and the next general election any cap on numbers will seriously affect the chances of some students to find a university place. They won't be the wealthy who can pay for tutors to help their children obtain the necessary grades, nor those in well staffed and high performing state schools. But what of the children living in Oxford who last year had the lowest KS1 results in England? How can we ensure a system that allows those with ability, but no social or economic resources, the chance to go to university, secure an apprenticeship or even find a job in ten years` time?

The Pupil Premium will help, but by itself it is not enough. I meant that 'no child [*should be*] left behind' when some years ago I borrowed the title of my report from President Bush. I still believe that is the task of government in relation to education, both in times of plenty and of hardship. Changing the vision at Westminster so that there is less focus on organisation and satisfying consumers and more on improving outcomes for all children might be a start.

Professor John Howson is President of the Liberal Democrat Education Association and a former parliamentary candidate.

Free to be Young?

Linda Jack

The Liberal Democrat youth policy paper, *Free to be Young*, made a commitment to put the Youth Service on to a statutory footing. This was not an easy position to take given our commitment to 'localism' but was one based on the fact that, whenever cuts are made, it is inevitably the Youth Service first in the firing line. The last few weeks have demonstrated the truth of that as the Youth Service looks increasingly likely to be the first public service to disappear altogether. We already know that local authorities like Norfolk and Suffolk will cut their services completely and others look likely to follow suit in the next financial year.

So why does it matter whether the Youth Service continues or not? Having left teaching to become a youth worker nearly 30 years ago now, I often joke that I left teaching because I was interested in learning . . . but there is an element of truth in that. One of the things that has always interested me is how, when and why young people learn, and the reality that for some young people school is a nightmare. Mori did some polling that found 1 in 7 children hate school - that is a shocking statistic and one that should worry all of us who have an interest in education. And yet it is the children and young people who are failed by school who are often blamed for the failure, something likely to get worse if the White Paper goes through unamended. We don't plant lime loving plants in acid soil and then blame the plants when they don't thrive - and yet we do that to our children!

So for me, non formal education, the kind provided up and down the country by good youth services, be they in the statutory or voluntary sector, has an enormously important role to play in contributing to the education of young people, particularly for those who have been let down by home and school.

The Benefits of Youth Work gives a useful overview of the contribution that youth work can and does make to the success and wellbeing of young people (*The Benefits of Youth Work*; Viv McKee; published by UNITE the Union, 2010). Two examples cited demonstrate this:

'Reaching Socially Excluded Young People' provided evidence of the impact of detached youth work on helping reduce social exclusion and re-engaging marginalised young people. It used a 'ten-point social exclusion inventory' to identify the problems

addressed by the projects and to chart the progress of young people over time. This found that poor school attendance and temporary exclusion had fallen by almost a third; anti-social behaviour was reduced by over 75 % and offending by a quarter; and the proportion of young people excluded from youth provision was reduced to zero. It also found a drop in the numbers of young people unemployed or not in education or training, and an increase in young people regularly attending structured youth activities.

Thurrock Youth Service runs a 25-hour alternative education programme for young people excluded from school or at risk of exclusion, offering opportunities for them to gain basic skills and develop personal confidence. All the young people who took part in the project in 2005-06 were subsequently in training, education or employment by June 2006. (Ofsted, 2007).

So it seems to me, now more than ever, we as Liberal Democrats have to argue for an holistic approach to education. To recognise that young people only spend 15% of their waking hours in formal education and learn in a variety of different settings and different ways. Now, more than ever before, we have to make the case for youth work and for putting the youth service onto a statutory footing. The alternative is potentially far more costly, both in monetary and human costs.

Linda Jack is a former chair of Unison's Youth and Community Workers' Forum and chaired the Youth Policy Working Group. She is currently Youth Policy Adviser for the Consumer Financial Education Body and represents the FPC on the Education Parliamentary Committee.

Does “Every Child (still) Matter” under the Coalition?

Joan Walmsley

It started the day Michael Gove changed the name of the Department for Children, Schools and Families to the Department for Education. Charities, lobby groups and individuals with an interest in the well-being of children started running round like headless chickens crying “Woe, woe, they don’t care about children’s well-being”. What rubbish! The phrase heard most often (and the one that makes me really cross) was “It is feared that...” Every announcement was greeted with negative, and highly imaginative, prophecies of doom for the well-being of children. So is it all justified?

Well, let’s look at what has *actually* been announced.

- School budgets are to be flat compared to last year. Yes, inflation means it’s a bit less but it could have been a whole lot worse. Less ring-fencing of grants so more freedom for Headteachers to decide how to spend it.
- Fifteen hours free early years education for 120,000 deprived two year olds (on top of continuing the same provision for all three and four year olds).
- 4,200 additional Health Visitors, mostly to be based at Sure Start Centres.
- Continued commitment to the Family Nurse Partnership for families with multiple problems.
- The pupil premium, starting low admittedly, but growing to significant sums during the Parliament.
- Meanwhile, work is proceeding on a new national funding formula for schools to try to sort out existing unfairness and some of the unfair extra payments to academies, which existed under Labour, have now ceased.
- A review of the vetting and barring scheme to stop discouraging people from working with children. This needs looking at very carefully but has generally been welcomed by the children’s charities. It was never a watertight way of protecting children anyway. Indeed, it may have encouraged some to

feel they had no responsibility and they could leave it to others. It doesn't deal with the lack of 'portability' of the CRB checks though. That is currently being looked into. It can't be right that one of the Bishops in the House of Lords has to have *five* CRB checks because he regularly visits five schools!

- The Government commissioned Frank Field MP to report on how it can reduce child poverty. The report focuses on family support and early intervention, not just more money for needy families. The report was welcomed by the Government
- The Government also commissioned Graham Allen MP to report on early intervention. The first part of his report makes abundantly clear the benefits of early intervention in the lives of children and families under all kinds of stress and has been welcomed by the Government. Although I have some reservations about the methodology used to assess the effectiveness of early intervention programmes (it comes from the US and may undervalue REALLY early intervention), I generally welcome this report and look forward to the second part which will propose new ways of raising the money. Early Intervention has always suffered from the "*pay now and reap the benefits in several years time*" problem, which is particularly difficult during hard economic times.
- Ken Clarke is saying all the right things about young offenders, reducing custody, focussing on prevention and restorative justice and ensuring better education provision when they have to be kept in custody. (No commitment to reduce the age of criminal responsibility though!)
- My health colleagues tell me that the Heath White Paper has an increased focus on child health, in particular that Cinderella provision, mental health.
- The Government has commissioned Claire Tickell to review the Early Years Foundation Stage. Nobody better!
- The Government has asked Professor Eileen Munro to report on better ways of safeguarding children. The first part of her report has been welcomed.
- The Government has committed to responding to all this good stuff about early intervention.
- Sarah Teather, who has been instrumental in a whole lot of the good things above, is about to publish a Green Paper to consult on proposals to shake up the statementing system and provision for children with special educational needs. Not before time!
- In the meantime, Sarah has ensured that the duty of schools to promote the well-being of their pupils has NOT been removed by the current Education Bill which has just started in the Commons.
- The Schools Minister Nick Gibb has announced a review of the curriculum from a team which consists of over half active head teachers. The objective is to slim down the curriculum, be less prescriptive and give more responsibility to teachers, which has always been LibDem policy anyway.
- He has also announced an internal review of PSHE with the objective of finding ways of improving the quality of what is taught. Having met the officials involved, I am convinced this is a genuine objective and, although PSHE is unlikely to become mandatory, there is the potential for smoothing out the patchy provision and raising the professionalism of PSHE teachers across all schools. This is essential.

So looking at the whole picture there are many things to celebrate. Of course, there are some worrying things too and some stuff we LibDems don't like at all. However, Dan Rogerson and I and our colleagues in both Houses are doing our best to influence Ministers where we can and will be carefully scrutinising the Education Bill (which has a couple of bits that we REALLY don't like as well as a lot that we do). Sounds like the classic "Curate's Egg"!

Baroness Joan Walmsley is Co-chair of the Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Committee for Education, Families and Young People and a member of LDEA

News on the Green Paper on Special Educational Needs

Duncan Hames

Duncan has been working with Sarah Teather, LibDem Minister of State for Children and Families, on a Green Paper on improving the system for children with SEN. In this article he reports on the key themes emerging from that work.

Our Ministers are always juggling the stream of urgent issues that land on their desks. For Sarah Teather it is with a determination to make a difference in some tangible way to children and young people. From wherever in Whitehall a policy is drafted, Sarah can be heard asking: "Have you thought of the children?" One of the major pieces of work that Sarah's been working on over the last few months is the development of a Green Paper on support for children with Special Educational Needs, due to be published in March 2011.

Sarah and her colleagues in the Department for Education started the process with a wide-ranging call for evidence, the responses to which were really helpful in informing our thinking. Importantly, it allowed us to think through how it felt to be a parent, or a young person, or a teacher experiencing the system, and put their point of view at the heart of our proposals.

The first theme we're addressing is something that has long been Liberal Democrat policy – the need to spot problems early and act on them. So often we hear how parents sense that something isn't quite right with their child, but can't get services to respond and react. Or, where problems aren't spotted, children arrive at school with undiagnosed problems, and those vital early years have been lost. So Sarah's been thinking through how we can link up with the review of the Early Years Foundation Stage, and the new additional Health Visitors coming on stream, to get this better.

Once an issue is spotted, we know that many parents feel the process of assessing a child's needs is too bureaucratic and slow, and there is a perception that it's sometimes driven by funding decisions, rather than a child's needs. To tackle that, the department's been considering how we can increase the independence of the assessment process, and we'll be trialling some new approaches, increasing greater involvement of the voluntary sector.

We'll also try and find ways to improve the information available to parents about what they can expect by way of support from their local schools, and what other help – such as respite care – is available in the area, so it's clear and transparent for everyone, and they can have confidence that there will be services they can rely on.

Finally, Sarah's been working really hard to respond to the many calls to get services more joined-up. There are just too many stories of parents having to get separate assessments from health, social services and schools, having to battle while different agencies argue among themselves, and often, too many times when this delays children getting the support they really need. As anyone who has worked in these services knows, this is complex work, and we won't succeed overnight, but Sarah is determined to make this work better for families and children.

When the Green Paper's published, there'll be plenty of opportunity to feed in your views via the LDEA or directly to the Department for Education.

This will be an area where, together, we can make a difference to the lives of some of the most disadvantaged children in our society.

Early Intervention – the key to keeping children safe

Carol Runciman

There is a lot of talk at the moment about keeping children safe, and also a lot of concern about reductions in expenditure in local councils. However, it is useful to consider the fact that early intervention is usually the best way to keep children safe as well as being less costly than higher level work – and is much better and more effective for children and families.

The first principle of early intervention is that it should start as early as possible. The voices of children should be listened to – alongside those of their parents and carers. With very young children, concerns are often played out in the home corner or the playground, and information about families is held in Children's Centres – they are the heart of the community. Watching and listening to children is a good way to pick up any problems and get in early to try to find solutions.

With older children, it is important that governors and school staff are helped to recognise that they hold a lot of knowledge and that they are often able to put the jigsaw pieces of a child's life together in a way that others can't. York's schools get a list each term of children where Tier 2 and 3 workers involved in the family - that is when concerns are getting a bit more serious – so that they are able to keep an eye on the situation and alert other professionals if things seem to be going wrong.

Of course, if a governor is worried about a child, the first person to talk to is the Headteacher – there may be a good explanation for what is happening and the school may be well aware of it, but it is always wise to check. It is not a good idea for a governor to befriend an individual child, unless they have been specifically asked to do so, as problems can be brought up in which the governor should not be involved. Being friendly is a different matter, everyone enjoys talking to the children when they visit schools and long may that continue!

For older children in particular, there are a lot of worries about cyberbullying and cybersafety in school, including the use of mobile phones. Most schools will have a cybersafety policy and will be very clear about what can and cannot be looked at on the internet, but this is a difficult area and one that is hard to check. As children get older, they can be quite secretive about what they are doing. Children's behaviour usually gives clues about issues in their lives and other children in the group or class may have concerns. They need to know that there is a teacher designated to deal with such matters that they can go to in confidence. There may also be a governor who has oversight of cybersafety issues. Once again, picking up concerns early is the way to stop them escalating until the problem gets very serious. Members of the School Council may wish to discuss it – after all, if anyone is likely to pick up the problems early, they are.

It is good to create 'Arenas of Safety' – safe environments in schools – so that children know what is acceptable and what isn't and who to go to if things are going wrong. When Ofsted calls, it is likely that they will ask the children if they feel safe – let's hope they say that they do. Knowing which groups are likely to be the most vulnerable is also important – those who have learning difficulties or disabilities, those who are in the care of the council, for example, need special attention just in case they need extra support.

Vital information can be held by partners, GPs, dentists, A&E, HVs and others. The local authority should be bringing representatives of such services together round the table – usually at the Children's Trust Board – to discuss concerns and develop ways of working effectively together.

When more serious worries start to surface, then advice may be needed from the local Safeguarding Board, or if you have one, a specialist advisory teacher (ours is funded through the Schools' Forum). Eventually a referral may need to be made to the Local Authority Children's Services Department. In York, we have a system of a single Front Door – to make referrals simple and ensure good gatekeeping. Callers speak to a person who is part of a multi-agency team; they can sort out the best place for the referral to go without many phone calls needing to be made to a variety of agencies. It is good to have a shared understanding of when to refer, many local authorities will have some criteria on their websites – try googling 'YorOK' – Safer Children York - and you will find our guidelines.

Prof David Thorpe, Lancaster University, says a third of referrals to Children's Social Care could have been dealt with somewhere else and that could stop families who might have needed more help from getting it. Local Authorities will have a procedure often known as 'step down' – when concerns are reducing and the support and help provided seems to be resolving the problem. That is not the end of the matter, an eye will need to be kept on the situation in case it escalates again and often the school will undertake that role. But getting in early and knowing when things need to have more professional help, or when help can be reduced or withdrawn, is good for children and their parents and carers and a good use of resources too.

Carol Runciman is a Councillor on York City Council, where she is Deputy Liberal Democrat Group Leader and Executive Member for Children and Young People's Services, and a member of LDEA

Testing phonics at schools

Wendy Scott

Some proposals in the recent Education White Paper are disappointingly at odds with the coalition government's welcome stated intention of replacing Whitehall bureaucracy with autonomy for professionals.

Michael Gove emphasises the importance of good teachers, saying that he will reduce the amount of central control, trusting professionals to make principled decisions about how best to do their jobs. The Department for Education's business plan recognises the importance of high quality early years education, particularly in the drive to improve the life chances of our most disadvantaged children (a position strongly supported by Frank Field's recent report on the Foundation Years and by Graham Allen's Early Intervention Review). These are highly desirable aspirations, which, if realised, will undoubtedly raise achievement and improve the quality of life for many children and families.

Regrettably, the planned phonics test for five and six year olds, which is to be piloted in June this year, belies the rhetoric. The proposal is open to consultation, but it is details of the test that are questioned, not its basic validity. In contravention of the government's own guidelines on consultation, information about the costs of setting up and trialling the test has been refused.

A high stakes test in Year 1 will inevitably lead to more direct teaching of phonics in the nursery and reception years, at the expense of more valuable experiences for the youngest children in our schools. Phonics is undoubtedly an essential element of learning to read, but the timing of the introduction of a systematic programme is crucial. Rigorous research evidence and professional experience do not support the early introduction of systematic phonics as an effective policy for the majority of young children, who may have very varied prior experience, interests and rates of development. An expert quoted by the government has warned that the premature limitation of children's literacy learning risks undermining their disposition to read and write. The White Paper's comparison of educational standards shows that those in the UK appear

to be falling. Yet, contrary to the clearly more successful models in other OECD countries, where formal schooling and the teaching of reading are not begun until children are 6 or 7 years of age, our government is imposing increased and earlier emphasis on basic phonic skills.

Children who are given plenty of time to develop all aspects of their communication skills, including an awareness of letter-sound correspondences, come to enjoy books and to understand the purposes of reading and writing before they are expected to crack the irregular phonic code for English. They achieve just as well at age 11 as others whose motivation to read and enjoyment of literacy in all its forms are undermined by premature pressures to decode text. This is all the more true for children who do not get rich experiences of language and literacy at home or whose first language is not English. For them, the introduction of a test of their ability to decode non-words is particularly unwelcome; at this age, children learn by making sense of the world around them and it is hard to think of anything more confusing than nonsense words, however phonetically predictable they may be. A better investment would be to provide early support through rich and enjoyable literacy experiences in a meaningful context.

Knowing that most teachers of young children are concerned about the impact of the planned test, TACTYC, the Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators, has started a petition against this counter productive waste of scarce resources. Details of the petition and of TACTYC's response to the phonics test consultation are available on <http://www.tactyc.org.uk/our-view.asp>

Wendy Scott is President of TACTYC and member of LDEA

The importance of Teaching White Paper and School Improvement: 10 questions for school governors

James Kempton

In charting the an ambitious reform programme to raise standards for all children while narrowing the gap between rich and poor, *The importance of Teaching White Paper* and subsequent Education Bill set out a vision for excellence, underpinned by freedom and fairness. School level innovation and diversity are seen as strengths, freeing teachers to do their best for the children they teach. All schools will have the freedom to drive better outcomes for all children, with more autonomy for heads and teachers and an end to the centralised micro-managing of schools which characterised Labour's failed approach.

While much has been made of the opportunities for headteachers in this freedom revolution, less has been said about the crucial role governing bodies will have to play. This paper offers 10 questions to help governors in leading school improvement in the context of the new policy environment set out by the Coalition.

Q 1 Underneath the rhetoric of the biggest shake up of education "since the Thatcher Government", how radical actually is this White Paper and how much does your school actually need and intend to change?

Q 2 To what degree will you continue with Every Child Matters' broad and collaborative approach to tackling the underachievement of disadvantaged children or will you follow the White Paper's narrower focus on raising attainment through learning and school autonomy?

Q 3 Given the new primacy of the school as an institution, what model of leadership will you adopt
É professional leadership – by teachers

- É managerial leadership – by the Headteacher
- É ‘trustee’ leadership – by governors?

Q 4 How do you balance the support and challenge roles for governors set out in the White Paper? And without School Improvement Partners, with a reduced role for Ofsted, and with local authorities being less hands on, what support do governors need to hold the Headteacher and teachers to account effectively?

Q 5 With local authorities now under significant financial pressure and able to choose what improvement support they provide, what should you as governors expect from their local authority in the future?

Q 6 While the Coalition Government’s intention is that the best schools and school leaders will take on greater responsibility for leading improvement across the system, how ready is your school to accept help of this sort and how do you know that what is being offered is actually good enough?

Q 7 In the same spirit, how ready and open are you to accepting help from another Governing Body on improving your leadership and governance and again how would you quality assure the help offered?

Q 8 In the increasing market for education and school support services, how do you know that your staff have the skills to procure significant contracts effectively and how prepared are you as governors to take responsibility for what they do and for entering into major and long-term financial commitments?

Q 9 Are you ready for the consequences of Local Authorities feeling a lesser sense of ownership and protection for “their” schools and offering in contrast more assertive scrutiny of your school’s performance?

Q 10 Given the move to school autonomy and greater transparency, are you personally ready to take accountability for the school’s performance, including being subjected to the sort of media scrutiny you have seen elected councillors experience in the past?

James Kempton is former Leader of Islington Council, a member of the Ministerial Advisory Group on the role of Local Authorities in Education and Children's Services and a member of LDEA

Academies, Version 2, and the Big Society

Helen Flynn

New academies are popping up everywhere, despite not being in the Coalition Agreement.

Some have been lured by a small amount of extra cash - the result of a double funding blip that might give some new academies a bit of a boost for a year or so, but is not sustainable long term. Some are racing to get away from the oversight of our least effective Local Authorities. Some think they can see the writing on the wall for the future funding of Local Authorities (having seen the cuts imposed on local councils by the Coalition Government in the past few months) and would rather jump ship now and form an independent funding relationship with Government, rather than continue to face uncertainty at the local level.

Most are secondary schools, as they are typically the only schools with a big enough head count for it to make sense financially and logistically with all the new responsibilities academies have to assume. Most are in the leafy suburbs and are already in the Ofsted category of ‘Outstanding’, so are already doing a good job and have relatively economically advantaged intakes. All of them, arguably, are tired of the ceaseless tide of initiatives coming from the centre and want more than anything to get on with the job of teaching without endless interference.

Motives and the desire to become a new academy present a complex picture - one that is not easy to judge, despite attempts in many quarters to do so.

Like much of what the Coalition says it is aiming to do, it does seem to be devolving more power down to the local level - albeit the 'micro-local' level - and giving schools and the professionals who work there more autonomy. What we are all unsure of is whether the net result will be significant gains in attainment across the board (especially as there is no legal requirement for the new academies to 'buddy up' with failing schools, as Gove had originally promised), or a more divided system of state-funded schools, resulting in less social mobility.

With less rush and more forethought in terms of their governance and other legal requirements, these new academies could have been examples of the Big Society in action and could have afforded the Government some degree of credibility. Whilst much of what the Big Society means remains opaque, arguably three definite themes emerge: an increase in volunteerism; greater local empowerment; and encouragement of mutuals and cooperatives. How successfully are these three themes addressed in new academies?

Volunteerism

Schools are blessed with possibly the largest army of volunteers in the country, i.e. governors. But in new academies their numbers are to be drastically reduced, and rather than predominantly electing them, they are now to be predominantly appointed - in addition, they are to be appointed by unelected Trust members. This is supposed to make them more effective and more business-focused. Sadly, it ignores the (arguably 'Big Society') case for the training of willing stakeholder volunteers who have a great feeling for how the school relates to the community it occupies, and who could be elected democratically.

Empowerment

How do new academies empower three of their major stakeholder groups: parents, pupils and staff? Parents now, rather than seeking redress for complaints at the local level, must rely on Whitehall to decide their fate, once the governor route has been tried. In addition, unlike Trust Schools where there was a duty on governors to establish a Parent Council (in accordance with the School Governance [Parent Councils] [England] Regulations 2007), to which governors had to pay regard, aside from having two parent governors, the new academies need have no other parent involvement in their running.

Student voice remains dumb throughout the Academies Act, with no clause inserted to grant rights for pupils to express their opinions on how issues affect them in school. Nor does the Big Society seem to have shored up the importance of the Citizenship element of the curriculum (at least it certainly has not made it into the English Bacc, unlike Ancient Greek - a well known method of empowerment for those privileged to learn it).

Staff are not allowed to be members of the Trust Board, nor is there any legal requirement for new academy Governing Bodies to appoint (or elect) Staff Governors. As regards pay and conditions, even though academies may decide to start off by implementing national pay and conditions for staff, it is within the gift of the Trust to change its mind.

Mutuals and Cooperatives

Models of corporate governance involving the principles behind cooperatives and mutuals are supposedly being encouraged under the Big Society. Thus it seems unusual to say the least that all academies are companies ultimately run by directors (Trust members and governors) with limited liability, who are accountable to Companies House. Its Trust Board is unelected, unrepresentative, and its members can serve on it until they drop off their perches, as long as they behave themselves. A cooperative model of governance for schools may well have been a better fit, and more Big Society-friendly.

It's fair to say that new academies score low on the Big Society scale. But though the Big Society may yet prove to be a fad, with a bit less haste, and a lot more joined-up thinking, the ideas behind it may have yielded a more palatable version of state-funded, independent schools that Liberal Democrats could have more readily embraced.

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Demystifying LACSEG !

Peter Downes

One of the puzzles surrounding the conversion of schools to academies has been the source of the extra money that academies receive to compensate them for not receiving services from the Local Authority (LA) they have decided to free themselves from!

This money rejoices in the acronym LACSEG = **L**ocal **A**uthority **C**entral **S**pend **E**quivalent **G**rant. It appears to be calculated on the basis of certain lines in the LA's Section 251 return to the DfE. This is the annual statement of LA expenditure and although it is supposed to follow a standard format, I understand that there is some scope for interpretation on which item of expenditure is assigned to which heading.

Part of the LACSEG comes from that element of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) that is held back by the LA to provide services to children and young people with the kind of acute special needs that cannot reasonably be met by schools from within their normal Individual Schools Budget (ISB). This holdback varies from LA to LA and is decided, not by LA officers in isolation, but by the Schools Forum on which heads and governors are represented, as well as councillors as observers. The percentage holdback varies from as low as 9% and up to about 14%, depending on how much the Schools Forum decides to delegate.

The rest of the LACSEG is calculated on that part of the council's budget which is used to run the school system and this provides the bulk of the extra money that converting academies receive. The percentage uplift for academies is on the DfE web-site as a 'ready reckoner'. There is a further complication that adds money to academies according to their SEN element.

One of the specific challenges faced by governors considering opting for academy status is whether the school will be better or worse off by so doing. The DfE's official statements say that 'the government is clear that a school converting to academy status does not have a financial advantage or disadvantage'.

In practice, when heads, bursars and governors have worked their way through the figures, they have usually found that they have more money than they estimate they will need to replace the deleted LA services. For many, this has been the major incentive for opting out. Some of the reports provided by heads for their governors make other generalised comments such as 'being an academy will enable us to develop the school in the way that suits our pupils best', or 'if we don't become an academy and our local rivals do, we will no longer be in the Premier League'.

But it is the bottom line 'profit' that is the attraction, especially at a time when the core budget will not be increasing (although, compared with most local services, schools are relatively protected). What schools were not expecting is the sharp reduction in Devolved Formula Capital, something around an 80% cut, which has caught out some schools that have had work done on the reasonable assumption of future income.

So, where is the 'LACSEG bonus' coming from? This mystery was resolved in the Local Government settlement announced on December 13th 2010, which revealed that the DfE and DCLG had agreed that £148 million would be top-sliced from the general grant to councils in 11-12 and a further £117 million in 12-13, making a total reduction of £265 million for 12-13.

This announcement created dismay in local government circles where there is already great pressure on all council services (adult social care, youth provision, libraries, road maintenance etc) and to make things worse, the top-slice is to be applied to all councils, irrespective of the number of academies in their patch. This, says the DfE, is because they cannot predict exactly how many academies will be opened and where. Those LAs where there are no academies are particularly incensed that they are being punished for being the kind of LA that schools want to stick with.

Each passing month brings new revelations about the mystery of school funding and we look forward, of course, to the root and branch review of the process and the 'national funding formula'. When that happens, the financial advantage of being an academy may disappear, leaving governors with all the risks and responsibilities and no compensatory bonus.

Anybody who has further information to contribute, or other perspectives, is warmly invited to let me know so that we can find ways of disseminating best practice and latest developments through the LDEA e-group and mailing-list.

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Education Policy Under the Coalition – Does the reality match the rhetoric?

Gerald Vernon-Jackson

Well, let's be honest. Did any of us fight the election to have Michael Gove running education in England? Not me, and probably not you either.

We have tended to have a view of education being a universal service and one where co-operation between schools in a learning community was our aim, not outright competition.

Yet of all the Secretaries of State that I deal with Michael Gove has been the one most willing to meet LibDem Councillors and to debate things sensibly with us. But the issue is, does this change policy? Is he polite and just set on his own path?

It is clear that the Secretary of State sees the school, not the Council of Local Education Authority, as the key building block in education. There is a logic line that leads from this, so that schools become responsible for their own admissions, their own improvement, their own recruitment etc. But the White Paper does have a strong if different role for Local Councils and the community.

The new role seems to me to be about three things.

1. As the champion of children and families so that they have someone on their side if schools don't keep to the rules.

2. A role in making sure that there are enough school places, special provision and support services for schools to be able to use as they wish.
3. To monitor performance of schools and challenge them to improve.

This is a different role for Councils, but it is an important role. However, there are for me key decisions that will show whether the Secretary of State takes Council's roles seriously. As usual these are mainly about money.

If this experiment – which may well fail – is to have the Coalition's stamp of fairness on it then the funding has to follow the needs of children and not any ideological agenda. Strategic capital allocation must be decided by the organisation that is commissioning provision and services – Councils – so that they can balance the bids from various schools based on need. There will be a call from academy providers that some Councils will discriminate against them - but this is easily killed by a right of appeal to the Secretary of State.

Likewise the allocation of day to day funding to schools needs to be on a basis of fairness and not dependent on what sign is outside the school.

I am serving on a group looking at funding of education within the Department and this line of fairness has been accepted by the Secretary of State. I will continue to push it and I will look to see if the rhetoric of fairness in education is reflected in the reality of the Coalition Government's decisions. The jury is very much out on this.

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Developing a new strategic education role for Councils

David Bellotti

Local Authorities will need to develop a new strategic role as the Academies Bill and Education Bill begin to have their effect on the ground. And I think it could be a much better role than at present.

Of course there will be some who will continue to oppose what they don't like and find all sorts of reasons to support their arguments. However I'm always of the mind that we can improve things, and that in education working with others is more important than taking a political position. So the question for me is how Councils can change to provide added value for our children as they experience their education.

Since the Coalition Government was formed we have, as Liberal Democrat Councillors, had some success. We have ensured that there is a level playing field for funding for all schools. We have ensured that all schools will abide by the Admissions Code. We have ensured that if an academy or free school excludes a pupil they will continue to pay for them and the pupil will continue to count on the schools attainment record. We have also been able to dispel some myths such as that an academy could sell off some of its land without reference to anyone, which is not true because it would have to go through the same process as any other school.

I don't believe that councils have 'controlled' schools for a very long time. The Dedicated Schools Grant and the advent of School Forums changed our relationship with schools for good. I do welcome the consultation

about a Schools Funding Agency. However I do question whether it is necessary to have a SFA - and it must not just be a replacement for the Young Peoples Learning Agency.

Locally, though, our role must change. It will be our responsibility to coordinate admissions and ensure fairness. We will be able to bring in new providers to bring about improvement. We will become commissioners. We will be able to call in Ofsted to inspect a school. In extreme cases where standards are poor we can refer a school to the Secretary of State. We will have a special role to act as a champion of parents and children, supporting vulnerable children and those with SEN.

To achieve our new role I believe we will have to up our game regarding scrutiny. In every Council there must be a dedicated Scrutiny Committee for Education. It should be well resourced and the membership should include not just Councillors but parents, governors, teachers and young people. The Scrutiny Committee should be free to look at any aspect of education in its area, including curriculum. All Schools will have to provide the information on which the Committee will base its findings. Comparisons between schools as well individual school performance over a whole range of education provision can become the norm.

In the future the Chair of Education Scrutiny should be a post in a Council as important as the Cabinet Member for Children's Services.

Scrutiny should lead to policy development. It can lead to schools sharing their resources to increase opportunity for pupils. It can lead to Councils changing their priorities in areas like transport to schools. It can lead to engaging businesses in offering work experience and more.

Our task now is for Councils to develop their new role and add value.

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