

Results of the Local Association Survey 2011

The survey of Local Associations (open from 26th September to 31st October) was answered by 55% of Local Associations. The aim was to determine different funding strategies; how they feel about the NGA; and what issues they want us to be supporting. Most associations have been running for over 6 years (90%) and have a mix of LA maintained schools and academies in membership (70%). The executive committee is made up of an average of 11 people (ranging from 4 – 24). Two thirds of Local Associations who responded had over 80% schools in membership; the minimum requirement is 25% of schools.

LA Relationships

With funding cuts abundant in Local Authorities (LA), over 90% of Local Associations still feel they have a good working relationship with them; 87% are asked to provide members for LA committees, groups and forums. Whilst only half have a formal partnership agreement, 95% have meetings with LA officials, including over 80% with the Director of Children's Services. Only 30% regularly meet with Head teachers' groups and other teaching unions.

Running of Associations

Most associations hold between 2 and 5 meetings a year, attended by up to 50 people normally. Of the 21 Associations which do hold an annual conference, only 6 organise it alone; most conferences were organised with the LA and without a charge to members. 80% of those who responded felt that difficulty in retaining members has not changed; only 12% reported a drop in membership over the last year.

By far the biggest problem in running the association was time and capacity, which has been experienced by over 90% of associations. Funding and distance between volunteers were less of a barrier than expected, affecting only 13% of respondents. Another issue raised was the lack of enthusiasm and too much apathy among volunteers, who already give up their time to be a governor.

Although funding is not a key problem in running the association, it is a major issue to the member schools of over 30 associations, coupled with cuts to LA services (90%). A quarter are worried about school reorganisation, one in five stated their schools had encountered problems recruiting good teachers and head teachers, and over half found academy conversions to be an issue.

Funding

Of the 39 Associations who answered, 9 receive grants from their LA (of amounts ranging from £1,750 to £18,000); 2 of these charge a further amount in subscription fees (£15 and £50). Only 5 are continuing to operate with neither a grant, nor subscription fees, though there were a few concerns whether they would manage in future¹. Subscription amounts range from about £5 to £100 per school, though the pricing structure has some variations: some are calculated by school roll, school phase or number of governors. Half of those which charge a subscription fee collect it themselves, while the other half have it collected for them by their LA.

¹ The suspension of subscription fees was in view of funds accumulated in one instance. Reasons were less clear for the other four.

Services

The most commonly provided services included:

- 87% Representation on LA committees, working parties etc;
- 56% Annual conferences;
- 53% Termly newsletters;
- 51% Briefing sessions;
- 49% Help or advice services; and
- 46% Stand alone website.

Virtually none of the Associations who answered charged any extra for services; the 3 that do charge the LA for production of materials, members £30 for the annual conference, or non-members who attend meetings. The most common form of communication is emails, which are used by all but 2 of respondents. Half issue hard copies of information, while 40% have their own website. Less than 10% reported using social networking sites.

Over 80% of Associations who took part in the survey feel they are good at monitoring and challenging their LA. 60% think one of their strengths is the meetings they hold; both newsletters and gathering governors' opinions are also thought of as strengths by half of the associations.

However, whilst 50% thought they were good at gathering governors' opinions, nearly 70% feel this is an area they'd like to improve, though networking and recruitment of more active volunteers are the most common areas they wish to improve (70% and 83% respectively). Something many associations (nearly 50%) want to do is improve communications, either through local networking or sharing good practice and gathering opinions. Time and capacity appear to be the main barriers to this, though funding was mentioned by one in four.

NGA

The majority of associations (nearly 90%) do feel supported by the NGA. Comments as to why included:

- Discussions and support from Clare (Chair of NGA);
- NGA is always there;
- Excellent weekly briefings, good magazine and national conferences, and good personalised advice when needed;
- We are very involved and know personnel quite well. They are always there with advice and have supported the association many times in the past;
- Sending out regular newsletters with up to date information and reporting on meetings;
- Great support during a crisis;
- Love the emails, magazine and information books
- We participate in regional events regularly, and Emma and others will always help if we request help of them;
- At government level. Also source of useful information for Association and members. However in [our region], contact between individual associations has been more beneficial than regional meetings;
- They are our next step from LA members to central Government;

- NGA briefings keep us and our schools informed;
- We take advantage of briefing and mailings, which inform our governors about the national scene and what others are doing, and reassure us that the governor voice is heard at national level.

Issues raised by the Associations as things they wanted the NGA to take up included:

- Effective cost for R&M in PFI schools.
- [We] have been one of the better funded LAs. We are concerned that with a national funding formula our funding will drop substantially and we will be unable to maintain the vast improvements that have been made in the last decade.
- We found it quite difficult to identify what Legal Advice we might get from NGA during a 'difficulty'.
- Challenging the government on the damage they are doing to the education system;
- We haven't been active in regional affairs, mainly because of the venue's accessibility for our committee members. Regions are geographically large. Could we move to some kind of e-version of regional gatherings?
- Our running costs are minimal thanks to the generosity of all Council members, but we can see the time approaching when we may no longer be able to function using this model. Perhaps in a year's time we may call upon the NGA to help us re-structure.
- Promotion of the need for training (not just for Chairs). Support for governors with re-organisation.
- Duties and responsibilities of governors in academies. How best to support governors in academy converted schools.
- Data security for schools and GBs. What are the risks of the recent rather loose guidelines (Freedom of Information Act) and what should GBs really be doing?
- Start up funding for new schools.
- Persuade the government to fix school funding (whatever it is) for 2-3 years so that schools can plan in good time for the future.
- As an association we have taken up the position of neutrality on academies but we are anxious that governors looking at this receive independent and impartial advice (someone like an IFA for personal finance) and that there is a consistency about consultation and the way in which decisions are reached. Not likely from government but a protocol developed by the NGA might be useful.
- DfE to consult more people at the chalk face and not the same old faces.
- The implications of what is happening at the moment are still not fully understood or appreciated by so many - why is there not more opposition (non-political and political) and more publicity given to the negative effect of what is being put in place.