



Minutes of a meeting of HASGA, Hackney School Governors' Association, held on Wednesday 11th February 2014 at the offices of the Learning Trust. The meeting opened at 6.40pm.

Present:

Lee Laudat-Scott	Baden Powell
William Sheasgreen	Betty Layward and Stoke Newington School
Derek Powell	Cardinal Pole
Layla Conway	Grasmere
Elaine Hendry	Harrington Hill
Pamela Sills	Holmleigh
Emily Halgarten	Jubilee
Jo Macleod	Lauriston
Almas Jaffer	Parkwood
Ophelia Carter	Princess May
John Coombes	Queensbridge
Christopher Sills	Sir Thomas Abney
Lisa Neidich	Sir Thomas Abney and
Mary Hiscock	St Paul's with St Michael's
Bernard Hawes	Stormont House
Antonia Canning	William Patten

Clerk: Carol Moore for Angela Adedeji

In Attendance: NONE

1. WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES

The Chair opened the meeting at 6.40pm and welcomed all delegates to the meeting. Apologies were received from, Catherine McGuinness (City Academy), Jean Charles (De Beauvoir), Maggie Kalnins (Mossbourne), Kate Loewenthal (Federation of Lubavitch) .

2. SACRE – Cllr Kate Hanson

The Chair proposed that as Cllr Hanson was not present for this item that they proceed with the remaining items on the agenda.

Initialed.....

3. OPHELIA CARTER, HEAD OF FINANCE AND CO-HEAD OF GOVERNOR SERVICES AT HLT

Ophelia Carter tabled a paper which was drawn up with HASGA delegates in mind who also tended to be Chairs of committees, GBs and long serving governors. The paper was divided into three sections, each with its own set of questions:

- a) Setting the budget
- b) Monitoring the Budget
- c) Financial procedures

with an addendum – ‘Possible fraud and other irregularities’.

Delegates were split into groups to discuss the questions under sections a,b,c above giving their feedback after discussing each section.

a) – Setting the budget

Q1: When setting the annual budget, are the objectives and costs related to the School Improvement Plan [School Development Plan (SDP)] incorporated into the budget plan?

In her experience Ophelia Carter said that half of governors would not see the SDP. Derek Powell felt that many schools had not seen the costed out version of the SDP. One chair of governors said that she was quizzed by her governors on the correct processes. All governors should ensure that they know what the process is.

Q2: What steps does your school go through when setting the budget?

Responses to this question confirmed that schools operate differently when it came to budget setting process. One governor commented that the process could be open and transparent.

Following one comment about the staffing budget forming 80-85% of the budget, Ophelia Carter informed delegates that the indicative budget which was circulated in January would give schools an idea whether their existing staffing plan was affordable.

Pupil Rolls can also be a trigger as it sets the basis for the calculation of funding.

Pupil Premium . In response to a question about information of schools’ Pupil Premium Grants being posted on the website most delegates indicated that their schools had complied with this legal requirement.

Q3: Does the Finance Committee play an Active part in preparing the school’s budget?

One school representative stated that since their reconstitution the school no longer delegates responsibility to committees; there are only full governing body meetings to which all governors are invited.

Q4: Does the Headteacher provide an estimate of the school’s total funding and compare this against expenditure?

One governor stated that the bursar provides this information at GB meetings. Others admitted that they were not so strong on criticising and asking questions where they did not understand.

Benchmarking

Another delegate mentioned that they would find benchmarking and the means to compare their data with that of other schools useful. The issue of benchmarking was discussed and the following noted:

- Benchmarking is a useful tool
- It was a service that the LA used to provide
- the possibility of sharing the information again is being considered
- Benchmarking in the public domain does exist and one can select LBH and look up ratios such as expenditure compared to pupil roll
- Some information relating to comparison with other schools is published to subscribers of the HLT's traded service

Q5: Does the GB approve the budget every year?

Ophelia Carter informed delegates that over the years the deadline for setting the budget was 31 May. This proved problematic because HLT Finance department was still chasing schools for their agreed budget in July. This year indicative budgets have already been published, with the final due to be sent out on 27 February.

School Budgets to be agreed by 1 May this year.

Q6: Has the Headteacher agreed a timetable for preparing the annual budget with the Finance Committee/Governing Body?

Comments in response to this question included the following:

- our GB has a special meeting to approve the budget
- each GB meeting has a theme
- one governor felt that the GB did not get the information from the LA on time

Ophelia Carter added that best practice would be for the FGB to meet and approve the budget by 1 May. If this was not possible the FGB should delegate responsibility to the Finance Committee to approve the budget on condition that it is approved/ratified at the next FGB meeting. If the latter option was chosen the Head should sign the budget return stating that it was approved by the Finance Committee and forward it to HLT Finance).

b) - Monitoring the budget

Q7: How often do you receive and review budget monitoring reports?

The response to this question varied between monthly and termly.

Ophelia Carter said that some Chairs even go in to school to look at bank statements which would also give an idea of the cashflow.

One governor questioned whether once per month and going in to look at bank statements would get in the way of school operations.

In a supplementary question Ophelia Carter asked delegates how, when looking at financial reports would they know they were on track.

In response one governor said that they would know from the variance reports.

Variations and Virements

Ophelia Carter added that it is important to have more than termly reports. October is a good month to consider virements, however they were not mandatory.

Initialed.....

Governors discussed this point. One governor felt virements were a waste of time whilst another said they have vired depending on the circumstances.

Q8: Are budget monitoring reports clear and understandable?

Delegates seemed to be in agreement that reports were clear.

Q9: Does the school compare its budget against year-end expenditure to assess accuracy?

Q10: is the financial statement in the annual report to parents sufficiently clear to allow judgments to be made on financial performance?

The last two questions under this section were taken together:

- it is no longer a legal requirement for schools to produce annual reports to parents;
- some schools place minutes of meetings on their school websites

c) – Financial Systems and Procedures

Q11: What financial policies does your school have in place and how often are they reviewed (and who by)?

Financial policies listed were:

- Pay policy
- Charging policy
- Financial scheme of delegation

SFVS return – 31 March 2015

Ophelia Carter asked how many delegates had been involved in signing off the SFVS return and stated that all governors should have sight of it. Governors were reminded that the SFVS is due to be signed and returned to HLT Finance department by 31 March 2015.

Q12: Has the School Business Manager/Bursar provided SIMS and related financial management systems reports to the Finance Committee?

Q13: Has the school documented its financial procedures?

Ophelia Carter stated that all schools have access to the HLT Financial Procedures which are online. Schools can adapt whichever sections that they feel are appropriate for them.

Possible fraud and other irregularities

Referring to the final two pages of the hand-out, Ophelia Carter reminded delegates that the irregularities that can occur in schools can result in financial loss and reputational damage amongst other losses.

Recommendations from recent audits

These included:

- Procurement procedures should be clearly documented (procurement is the big issue at the moment)
- Where applicable scheme of delegation should comply with
- List of suppliers that a school uses should be seen by Resources/ Finance Committee or FGB

Q: A delegate asked to what level should there be documented procedures, for example would minor contracts need to have documented evidence of procedures?

A: Ophelia Carter responded to say that Auditors would want to see the audit trail, for example the quotes for the proposed expenditure.

Q: Can governors pick the limit?

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A: Ophelia Carter responded that the EU Official Journal states that if there is a contract of circa £180k the contract must be opened up to EU competitive tendering. If there are large contracts it is hoped that the school would use the services of the HLT Procurement Department. Schools also need to be mindful that the requirement is not just for building work but also for other large contracts, eg large ICT contracts. In addition, it was commented that one school where governors had not been receiving much financial information had been awarding a number of small contracts to the same person.

On behalf of delegates the Chair thanked Ophelia Carter for her presentation. Ophelia Carter and Bernard Hawes left at 8.05pm.

4. REFRESHMENTS AND NETWORKING BREAK

5. HASGA BUSINESS

5.1 Minutes of previous meeting

The minutes were referred to the next meeting / noted ??

5.2 Meetings attended

No meetings were mentioned.

5.3 AOB

5.3.1 How Reconstitution impacts schools - Bill Sheasgreen

Bill Sheasgreen began by stating that he is a governor at two schools, one primary and the other a secondary. Both schools had reacted differently to reconstitution.

Stoke Newington (secondary) had been thinking of creating another committee and reducing in size from 20 to 12 governors but thought better of it and decided on a membership of 14 governors.

Link governor roles will have to be re-visited.

The new Chair (at the secondary), interviewed all governors to learn what each could contribute to the governing body.

Both Bill Sheasgreen's schools downsized but he has heard of schools which have increased their GBs and one wanted to have more parent governors.

Skills Audit – not convinced by it.

Lisa Neidich added that there is consensus about what schools need, ie commitment, time, to be fairly literate, but it is not necessary to be a lawyer or accountant. At her school, Lisa Neidich said, it took a lot of hard work to get parent governors to join the GB but now they have a diverse group.

Recruiting parent governors

Delegates discussed. Best practice shared included the following:

- When we have a parent governor vacancy we put letter out to say we strongly encourage members from whatever community we feel we need
- GBs could perhaps invite parents to join as associate members for one term or to attend a particular committee for a time

One governor raised the point that a GB could be trying to recruit ethnic minorities but when it then reduces in size it can become more difficult as places might already be filled by existing governors.

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This point led to another question:

Deciding which governors should leave and which should stay

In discussing the matter the following possibilities were raised:

- If a GB has three LA governors,
 - the GB should vote if they want all three to remain as governors,
 - then decide who should be the LA governor on the GB
 - and whether the other two should be co-opted governors
- another governor said that it took many conversations over time to arrive at size Gb should be; some who had been governors for a long time felt it was time to step down and left thus reducing GB naturally

Drawbacks to downsizing

- Downsizing too much could result in one person over a term finding themselves in a position whereby they could not commit to the responsibilities agreed to
- Problems can also arise if governors are needed for hearings (eg disciplinary, appeal etc), the GB can find it has run out of untainted governors very quickly and has to seek governors from other schools to sit on panels
- Due to shortage of governors staff governors might be asked to sit on panels where the GB could be open to impartiality accusations – not only must justice be done it must be seen to be done

Solutions to drawbacks

- Informal links with other schools, for example reciprocal arrangements to share governors for appeal hearings
- Keeping a list of governors who are willing to sit on panels (LN keeps a list)
- Have staff governors on curriculum and resources committees and a small pay and personnel committee without staff
- Not to downsize at all. One delegate said that instead of downsizing, their GB intend to remain the same size and are making plans to specialise more

All agreed that it would be good to share good practice more often.

Question whether reconstituted

Finally, the Chair asked whether all present had reconstituted. Most of the delegates present stated that their schools had already reconstituted.

5.4 Dates for future meetings (Note change to March meeting)

Future meeting dates were noted as follows:

24 March 2015

12 May 2015

8 July 2015

There being no further business the meeting closed at 8.45pm.

Signed _____

Date _____

Initialed.....