

8th October 2012**Dame Anna Hassan
Outstanding For All Education Commission**

Dear Anna,

Haringey Education Commission

Thank you so much for allowing me a recent opportunity to meet and speak to the commission. I have not so far had time to follow up my submission in writing and I apologise if it has arrived after any deadlines. My response is a personal one, as it was to a very large extent when we met. I made, at the end of my submission, a plea for classroom teachers to have more of a voice in the local authority. The council listens to headteachers but rarely engages with teachers. The interests of both groups do not always coincide. Having said that, I have no real mandate to write on behalf of our members and will therefore, as all too often, have to run with my instincts about what they would want me to say.

The NUT is very strong in Haringey

When I was questioned I explained that we have a very high NUT membership. We currently have about 2200 members and this figure has never been higher. We have the largest 'market share' by a very long way.

It would be tempting for Haringey's critics to try to ascribe its current weakness to the strength of the NUT. There are other ways of looking at this however. Since we met I have looked at the figures and there is actually the highest NUT membership density in high-performing schools. It is particularly noticeable that NUT heads and deputies tend to run respected schools. I have found that NUT membership often correlates with firm and fair leadership styles, a sense of being part of a team with staff and a deep commitment to equalities issues. There are parts of the borough where leading a school is as much a calling as a profession and I have huge admiration for some of our school leaders, many of whom are risking a great deal, by working in the schools they have chosen especially in recent times. We are proud to have them in membership of the NUT.

As a further point, I would add that our strength, and our direction, comes from members. We cannot represent members without a clear mandate from them. What some headteachers seem not to appreciate is that we act as a mouthpiece for their teachers, when concerns have been raised at school level without effect. We could never (and clearly would not) create problems where these did not exist in the first place or where there are no grounds for complaint. Some schools have seen conflict and some have even seen industrial action. We cannot lawfully ballot for strike action where there are no grounds for it. Our members would never vote to take strike action unless they felt that all other avenues had been explored and exhausted and unless they

felt aggrieved. Well-led schools resolve problems. They don't provoke teachers to unrest and then blame the union.

The NUT supports school improvement and recognises the value of holding teachers to account

All NUT members are either qualified teachers or teachers on recognised routes into teaching. It follows therefore that our members take high standards of teaching seriously. The union provides quality training and professional development and campaigns on behalf of children and education, not simply on traditional industrial relations issues. Since teaching is a collegiate profession, it is not in anybody's interests to carry colleagues who are underperforming. Similarly, we would want our members to be playing a part in the continuous improvement of any schools they are working in and for schools to be safe, successful, rewarding workplaces.

The role of the union in a capability case is to support the teacher to improve if they can

Some heads fail to tackle underperformance in teachers or tackle it badly. Some school leaders find the process intimidating, others show an unhealthy relish for the task. Some struggle with collecting evidence or following procedure and have to restart because they have made mistakes. No doubt this is inconvenient, or even exasperating, but heads should seek and take advice more systematically. The role of the union is to support members by making sure the process is fair, not to prevent it happening if intervention is justified. Given the high cost of training a teacher, and a high success rate in improving performance in some schools, it is always worth trying very hard to put a good support package in place and working to solve problems. However, where this doesn't work, we are always willing to negotiate a release. Many teachers go on from this to other roles, even as teachers in other schools, and do well.

The NUT would wish to see leadership and management more actively challenged

Although we have some extraordinarily able and successful leaders in Haringey schools, there are weak and failing heads. We would welcome intervention, which improved these head teachers and held them to account. Systems for identifying, improving and ultimately weeding out underperformance are robust for teachers, but they barely exist for school leaders, including governors.

The same arises over instances of misconduct. I gave the commission at least one instance, of many, where the NUT had, in effect, acted as whistle blower. It has often been a source of frustration that governors and the local authority were not aware and taking action themselves. More than this, we have discovered and reported misconduct, fraud and even gross misconduct and our reports have often been met with mistrust, even outright disbelief, initially. The allegation, emanating from heads and possibly governors too, that we have a personal agenda has been allowed to contaminate the process. It may be useful to reflect upon who benefits from this situation.

Schools should get first-rate advice and they should commit to following it

I raised the example of performance management not being conducted in schools. In our experience, there are heads who do not treat procedures, even statutory ones, with the respect they deserve. Although heads complain about the quality of advice they receive, and this complaint may have been to some extent justified over the years, the obverse is the repeated complaint from officers that they have given advice which has been ignored because it didn't accord with what the headteacher was intending to do.

There is, I believe, a culture of rebuttal in some schools. Criticism or challenge is unwelcome. Advisors, LA officers, questioning governors and demanding parents are too often treated with derision and suspicion. This is not healthy because it engenders a culture where adults' learning is stunted. It encourages a bunker mentality where the outside world is perceived to be trying to interfere with the work of the school rather than hold it, legitimately, to account.

Many, even most, of our schools have strong and decent leaders. Most have good industrial relations. Some have effective governing bodies whose challenge is respected and appreciated. However there is not, at the moment, any sense that the local authority knows which schools these are or could do anything about the ones that are not performing. The local authority is currently the weakest it has ever been.

The local authority should set about securing effective governance

The importance of governance has not been understood in recent years by the local authority and there are few, if any, mechanisms to check whether governing bodies are doing their jobs properly. The clerk to the governing body is often a freelance one, with no functional links to the LA and the client/provider role is one which, again, allows heads and governors to get advice they want to hear. For instance, we frequently have to advise staff (teacher) governors who are routinely made to leave for part two of governing body meetings. This is wrong, but too many clerks allow it to happen rather than remind all governors of their duty to keep confidentiality. It is instructive that teacher governors approach their union for advice rather than the governor support and training unit. I am not aware of any training for staff governors ever having taken place. This would clearly be a good idea if staff governors are to make good use of their position and navigate the sensitivities of being a voice for staff but also being able to work constructively with the head and chair as equals.

The lead member for Children and Young People's Services has a key role in appointing governors and the local authority should have a mechanism to brief and advise appointees and to hold them to account.

The local authority should do more to understand the communities their schools serve

Schools affected by low prior attainment, mobility, poverty, foreshortened horizons, being new to English, or homes where there is crime or drug use frequently have a high proportion of pupils who do not achieve national averages or above at the snapshot points in their school career. This is not an excuse; it's an explanation. It's also common sense. Our members know these children can do well, given time as well as resources and support. The authority should be making this case more robustly, rather than joining in as critics and judging schools simply on their raw data. The challenges of some of our schools cannot be underestimated.

Our current testing regime discriminates against many Haringey children and schools, branding them both failures before they have had a chance to succeed. Progress, school achievements and activities, staff turnover, performance management monitoring, governing body minutes, school websites, and a wealth of other sources should be used to inform officers and elected members about our schools. Local authorities work best when they know their schools well.

The authority needs to rise to the political challenges

The new OFSTED framework makes it extremely likely that schools in some parts of the borough will go into a category at their next inspection, whatever the strengths or weaknesses of their leadership or teaching. This, in turn, will have an impact upon the intake of many of our schools, since families with social capital tend not to choose to send their children to schools in special measures. The housing benefit cap, too, will bring a tsunami of turbulence to some schools. So far, schools trapped in this spiral have just been abandoned by the council and treated as an embarrassment.

In the past, schools could be outstanding without attaining SATs and GCSE results above national averages and many schools in deprived parts of the borough obtained good or better at inspection, retaining nervous parents and ensuring a more mixed intake. The 'limiting judgement' and the introduction of 'combined' English and Maths has altered that position for primary schools. Secondary schools judged against the EBAC standard will face the same kind of denigration, in all probability. Schools for some years have rarely been graded higher than their overall standards; there is around a 97% correlation.

Our schools, branded as failing whether they are or not, will find it hard to recruit staff. The pressures of working in a school in special measures are relentless and when a school is not failing in any other regard but the year six SATs results from the previous years, we have seen evidence of desperation; staff are being shed to prove that changes have been made. Children who can attain level four and five go elsewhere to escape a publically branded weak school.

Political leadership is vital. Haringey cannot allow schools to be handed over to academy chains who, if they fail in the face of Haringey's challenges, can only abandon the school to another, probably weaker, chain or charter. As inconceivable as it may sound, local government and local politicians have all but given up their rights and duties to intervene in schools on behalf of residents. They stopped taking this responsibility seriously a few years ago.

The authority needs a more sensible approach to child protection in schools

The death of Baby P resulted in a massive diversion of resources. Our schools and teachers have nothing to reproach themselves for over this terrible tragedy. Like Victoria Climbié before him, Peter Connolly didn't attend school, but the failure of children's social services, the police and health service to protect him has been a blight on education, schools, teachers' lives and careers. Teachers have managed the safeguarding agenda well but in our view, Haringey suspends teachers too easily. Suspensions can be very lengthy while multi-agency teams struggle for dates to meet or are engrossed in more serious cases. Worse still, teachers are suspended for what would, if committed at all, constitute disciplinary offences, not criminal offences or abuse. A teacher who grabs a child by the arm to prevent him hitting another child, or who is accused of being rude to a child, is too easily accused of assault or emotional abuse. The union has pressed for a more common sense approach but been told, 'This is Haringey.' The authority is at risk of allowing this to become another reason to work elsewhere.

The authority needs senior officers whose advice on education is valued and respected by schools

The safeguarding and children's social services agenda has resulted in a perception that the authority has lost interest in education. This has been reinforced by the appointment of a director with a social services background, a deputy director whose background has been in special needs and safeguarding and the dismemberment of the school improvement service last year which cut posts at the Professional Development Centre from 66 to 16 over a very short period. It is surprising that further restructuring and job loss are now being considered, particularly in the light of the work of the education commission, which has yet to report.

Many teachers and heads I have spoken to have said that the authority needs a director of schools. This would not be the same as the post of Head of School Improvement, which is currently proposed, as the post-holder would oversee services to schools. There would be a separation of the role of support from the role of challenge. What is clear is that there is scepticism about the effectiveness of the current management structure and its relevance to schools.

By the same token, the schools HR function should be able to offer robust and accurate advice and challenge. What we have currently was driven by local government budget reductions and the new structure, although there are strengths, needs review.

The role of the union

Some of the heads who have made submissions to the commission have strong views about the NUT, although I made the point that over the years they have rarely come to the union directly with complaints and concerns. We would welcome any concerns being examined by the authority under the same sort of arrangements we have had in the past but which have recently fallen into disuse with the departure of key personnel. By the same token, we would also value a local authority that listened to our concerns about schools and was prepared to look into these where we raised them. We would see this as a healthy way to conduct business and believe we have nothing to fear from this. There is however one caveat and that is that there needs to be a good understanding of the roles and duties on both sides. Some training may be needed.

Once again, many thanks for allowing me the opportunity to put forward my views.

Yours sincerely,



Julie Davies