A packed Hilton Hotel venue saw 120 ATL reps and active members come together for the 2013 ATL independent schools conference.

ATL president Alison Sherratt gave members a warm welcome before handing over to ATL general secretary, Mary Bousted, who delivered a forensic dissection of the paucity of evidence in government educational thinking. Members appreciated her speech, entitled ‘Sailing without a sea chart – the Gove reforms’, saying she was a “superb speaker, I was totally transfixed” and “Mary spoke with authority. I am glad she’s on my side!”

Delegates were entertained and educated in equal measure by Kester Brewin, ATL rep and author, who gave a thought-provoking talk on the enduring and complex appeal of pirates. Kester reprised his recent TEDx talk to make the case for how pirates relate to education.

Conference provided the first opportunity for members to hear the findings of ATL’s authoritative annual pay and conditions survey (see page two). Malcolm St John-Smith, chair of the Independent and Private Sectors’ Advisory Group (IPSAG), presented the highlights of the survey, including pupil numbers and the disparity between increases in fees and staff pay. As one member commented it is “encouraging knowing what is happening across the sector and to know that ATL is looking after us”.

Either side of a good lunch, delegates had the opportunity to attend seminar groups, with discussion ably chaired by members of IPSAG.

There is little in school life that creates more anxiety than an impending inspection, so it was no surprise to see members eagerly gleaning inside information from Paul Spillane, ISI reporting inspector and former head of Silcoates School. In his session, ‘An inspector calls - Will your lessons earn top grades?’ Paul addressed the key question of what exactly is an ‘excellent lesson’. Members’ verdicts: “very practical and helpful”; “well managed with good insights and tips”.

ATL members potentially have a powerful voice but just how to get the most favourable outcome in talks was the issue addressed in ‘Inside or outside the tent. Getting the best deal’. Peter Morris, ATL national official and Karl English, senior organiser, led the discussion on ways to maximise our impact in school.

“Can your employer require you to work additional hours? Or dock your pay? Can you just say no?” These were just some of the questions addressed in ‘How to deal with a variation of contract’. John Richardson, ATL national official for the independent sector, set out the basics of contract law, before leading a group discussion of case scenarios based on common contractual variations in independent schools. Feedback included: “Very informative” and “Wished we’d had longer.”

Members had the opportunity to discuss school issues with members of IPSAG. Also on hand to provide individual advice was Vicky Boyle, member adviser for the independent sector, and Hays Education, the recruitment specialists.

Of the conference as a whole, ably organised by Kat Griffin, one member called it a “very professional and well-organised event”, while another said it was “my first conference – I would like to attend again!”

While the conference programme is important, we never lose sight of the enduring attraction of simply giving members the opportunity to compare notes: “Interesting to share experiences with other colleagues” was one member’s comment.

The day ended with a lively question and answer session, leaving reps to return to their schools and ATL workplace roles reinvigorated.
For the fifth year running, the economic downturn has had an effect on the sector. The biggest worry is that a quarter of members report fewer pupils than a year before. However, it would be wrong to assume all schools are suffering.

The majority of ATL members report that their school is in rude health. Over two thirds of respondents state that pupil numbers remain steady, or have increased.

Comparing 2013 to the previous year, 40% of respondents stated they have more pupils in their school; 29% said they have the same number; and 25% have fewer.

The headlines are inevitably taken by the schools suffering a fall in numbers. ATL has secured redundancy and other payments for members in distressed schools and helped them find other jobs. Nationally, ATL are also campaigning for a ‘fit and proper persons’ test for owners to combat the spate of independent schools closing in chaos overnight.

Even in those schools that continue to prosper, the success is not being shared with staff as pay continues to lag behind inflation and workloads remain high.

The survey reveals that one fifth of staff received no cost of living increase for the 2013/14 academic year (21% teachers; 19% support staff), with the majority receiving an increase of between one and two per cent (54% teachers; 58% support staff).

A cost of living increase below the rate of inflation is a cut in real terms. ATL believes that, if the business is doing well, it is realistic for members to expect to receive a cost of living increase that at least matches inflation.

However, despite over two thirds reporting healthy pupil numbers, only one per cent of members received a cost of living increase that matched or bettered the 3.2% increase in the Retail Price Index in the year to September 2013.

As one member commented, “This year fees went up four per cent, teacher salaries by one per cent. [It is] unsurprising the teaching staff feel undervalued.”

Unfortunately, this year isn’t a one-off with many seeing it repeated during the recession as employers exploit the pay restraint in the public sector. The cumulative effect has been a significant erosion of members’ standards of living.

The same parsimony applies to fee increases, as one teacher commented: “Fee increases have been much higher than salary increases.”

Many ATL members feel that enough is enough and are discussing submitting a pay claim or securing their statutory right to collective bargaining in their workplace.

ATL provides briefings on collective bargaining in the independent sector and on union recognition. For those of you who, like Churchill, want your information on “one side of foolscap”, we have produced a Starter for Ten: Collective Bargaining. And for those of who want an even more digested read there is a Starter for One: Submit a Pay Claim. All of the briefings are available at www.atl.org.uk/independentbargaining.

You may also like to find out more about becoming a rep in your workplace to help with these issues. See www.atl.org.uk/repzone to find out more.

continued on page three
Workload

The survey reveals that many members continue to work excessive and often increasing hours.

Excessive workload is an endemic and cultural problem in the sector. It needs to be addressed for the sake of the employees and the pupils and is covered in law under the Working Time Regulations. See below for details of these.

More than two fifths of respondents work over 48 hours a week – the maximum prescribed under the Working Time Regulations. Almost a quarter (23%) work more than 60 hours a week during term time, compared to 20% in 2012. Long hours are exacerbated by inadequate rest breaks.

Shockingly, over half (51%) do not enjoy an uninterrupted lunch break of at least 20 minutes a day – the legal minimum when working more than six hours. ATL recommends that all school staff should have a minimum 40 minutes’ break away from their work every day.

One classroom teacher said: “Teachers are expected to do an increasing number of lunch and break-time duties. We have no lunchtime supervisors as such. We seldom get more than 15 minutes’ uninterrupted lunch and are required to escort children back to classrooms.”

Members report that long hours take a toll on their social lives and relationships. The needs of the pupils are important but so are members’ health, relationships and careers. Tiredness can adversely affect judgement when in charge of pupils. Should you really be driving the school mini-bus after working such long hours? Not to mention the dangers of ‘last week of term’ syndrome when things can be said or done through exhaustion which you may later regret.

Although workload is always going to be an issue, it can be addressed. A good starting point is ATL’s Work-life Balance Toolkit for teachers working in the independent sector. This provides practical tools such as surveys which help to quantify the problem, establish priorities, and identify practical solutions. The Work-life Balance Toolkit is available free at www.atl.org.uk/worklifebalanceindependent.

Where is the money going?

So if the money isn’t being paid to staff where is it going? ATL is concerned that an irrational facilities ‘arms race’ is resuming, funded at the expense of the sector’s most valuable asset – its staff.

Half of respondents (49.9%) said their school has major building projects going on or lined up for this coming academic year. These range widely from building theatres or cinemas to sports facilities and astroturf pitches, new blocks for science, drama and music to new blocks for boarding.

A teacher said: “My school has spent a substantial amount of money within the last year on building projects … and it has increased its fees by over four per cent per annum over the last three years. However, the increase in basic salaries for staff was frozen in 2011 and 2012 and has increased by 1.5% in 2013.”

The survey was carried out by email in October 2013 with the results announced at the ATL independent schools conference in November. Full details of the survey are available at www.atl.org.uk/recentsurveys.

Working Time Regulations

The primary purpose of the Working Time Regulations 1998 is to safeguard the health and safety of employees. They provide legal minimum requirements for all employers in respect of the length of the working week, a daily rest period, and a weekly rest period.

The working week is limited to a maximum of 48 hours, averaged over 17 weeks. In residential institutions, such as boarding schools, the averaging period is 26 weeks. Most workers have a right to a daily rest period of at least 11 consecutive hours in each 24. Employers must provide a minimum weekly rest period of at least 24 hours in each seven-day period for most workers.

Residential institutions, such as boarding schools, are excluded from the normal requirements on rest and breaks – but staff are ‘wherever possible’ entitled to claim ‘an equivalent period of compensatory rest’. ATL members in some boarding schools have successfully negotiated compensatory rest to be taken in blocks of time.

ATL provides a briefing on how the Working Time Regulations apply to independent schools, included as a chapter in the ATL guide to Working in the Independent Sector, which is available free to members at www.atl.org.uk/independent-guide.
ATL’s independent schools group

Fresh from playing a leading part at the independent schools conference, members of the Independent and Private Sectors’ Advisory Group (IPSAG) are working on independent sector motions to Annual Conference. They are also continuing with their sterling work personally contacting all new reps and contacts in their regions.

IPSAG, the elected member advisory group, plays an invaluable role promoting the interests of members and advising ATL on policy in the sector.

Two recent personnel changes are Mark Baker, ATL senior vice president, who has replaced Stephen Buck as the officer from ATL’s Executive Committee, and Roger Trowbridge replacing Tim Farmer, who has stood down due to workload issues. Many thanks go to Stephen and Tim for their contribution.

If there is an independent sector policy issue that you would like ATL to address, please contact the IPSAG representative for your area, or the chair of IPSAG Malcolm St John-Smith at mstjohn-smith@atl.org.uk.

The dates for the IPSAG meetings for the rest of the academic year are 29 March and 14 June 2014.

Further information, including the full membership of the group, is available at www.atl.org.uk/ipsag.

Opportunities to meet colleagues in the sector

Following on from the success of the independent schools conference, there will be two further opportunities this academic year for independent sector reps and active members to get together.

Two Saturday events will be held in London on 8 March and in Birmingham on 17 May. The programmes will include continuing professional development, legal issues and ATL business.

Following his popular sessions at the independent schools conference, Paul Spillane, ISI reporting inspector, will be joining us for one of the events.

The Birmingham event will be held at the beautiful new central library which is worth a visit in itself. The London event will be held at a central London venue to be announced in due course.

Full details will be circulated by email to school reps and contacts. Thereafter, if there are any spare places they will be offered to other members.

If you are interested in learning events in your region please contact learning@atl.org.uk or alternatively visit the learning zone on the ATL website at www.atl.org.uk/learningzone.

SHAPING EDUCATION

As a modern union, we listen to your voice so we can develop our support for you and focus our lobbying of decision-makers.

We’re asking you to take part in a survey and share your vision for independent education, so we can build our Shaping Education campaign ahead of the next general election. You can find the survey at https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/X2F2QVV.

You can also make your voice heard by asking your MP to engage with you and ATL – we’ve produced a postcard for you to fill in with your vision for education which we’ll then send to your MP. Copies of this have been sent to all independent reps and contacts with this mailing, but you can order copies by emailing despatch@atl.org.uk and quoting ATL/MF141.

The postcard lists several issues ATL members want to see addressed but there is also a space for you to fill in an issue which you feel particularly strongly about. Issues independent members have already raised that they want to see the political parties adopt include:

• a fit and proper persons test for independent school owners
• fair and transparent pay system with job evaluation for all roles
• Living Wage for workers
• universal and consistent teacher training.

For more details of our Shaping Education campaign, see www.atl.org.uk/shapingeducation.

ATL’s independent schools group

A happy IPSAG group at the independent schools conference

Photo by Sarah Turton

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