

ASSOCIATES NEWS



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Conference call

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Tell your tales

Enter our short story competition p10

CONTACT

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E-NEWSLETTER

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Update your GDPR preferences by visiting www.ascl.org.uk/MyASCL If you need login details for the website please email website@ascl.org.uk

Cover image: Vibrant Festival Bunting Credit iStock ugis bralens

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CHOPPY WATERS AHEAD

These are unsettling times but ASCL is focused on providing a clear course through them and standing up for education, says Pepe Di'lasio

A long-awaited Schools White Paper has been published which sets out major changes to the system for supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities, as well as many other reforms.

Some funding has been announced for increasing and extending the level of support available in mainstream schools. However, the money that is available is wholly inadequate to deliver change on the scale envisaged, and implementing the new system will be a major challenge.

It is a challenge which will, of course, fall upon the shoulders of our members, who are already struggling under the weight of many expectations, excessive accountability, and lack of adequate resources.

This is a recipe for professional burnout and we have drawn attention on several occasions to a wellbeing crisis in the education workforce which, as well as having a terrible toll on individuals, is likely to damage retention and make policy delivery even harder.

In all the reams of policy and guidance which pour out of Whitehall, this is an issue which is scandalously neglected, even though having a well-supported workforce with good morale is obviously pivotal to the success of any reform programme.

Uncertainty also surrounds the schoolteachers' pay settlement over the next three years.

Global turmoil

At the time of writing, the recommendation of the pay review body and the government's decision have not yet been published. Once that happens there is likely to be a row

over whether the pay award is sufficient to address inflation rates driven by current global turmoil.

Of at least equal importance is whether it is affordable for schools. The government has already indicated that the settlement will not be fully funded which would, of course, necessitate further cuts.

In the midst of all this, schools have also been given some pretty ambiguous guidance about mobile phone policies. There is a new inspection framework which is placing more pressure on members – particularly those serving disadvantaged communities – and which is as high stakes as ever.

And there is an array of government policies and expectations for which there are no additional resources.

If all that wasn't enough, there is also a big question mark over the direction of the current government. It is often difficult to sift fact from speculation in media reporting but a change of leadership would likely also mean a new Cabinet and new policies.

We were in this situation on a number of occasions under the Conservatives and one would have hoped the new government would have been less vulnerable to political instability. However, the rising fortunes of Reform and the Greens appears to have spooked many Labour politicians.

Superb teams

It seems unlikely that existing education reforms would be unravelled but they may be tweaked and added to – particularly as education tends to be a go-to for political leaders keen to demonstrate that they are doing something.



Pepe Di'lasio, ASCL General Secretary

I'm sorry if this all sounds a little downbeat.

Unfortunately, the reality is that things are tough for many of our members at the moment, and the role of ASCL in supporting them has never been more important.

Fortunately, we have superb teams who are able to offer support, guidance, and information – whether that be our member support hotline, industrial relations representation, communications, or professional development events.

Politically, we'll continue to offer a constructive, solution-focused voice to governments of whatever complexion. ASCL will always stand up for education, for our members, and for the children and young people they serve.

By doing that, we'll endeavour to provide a clear course through unsettled times.

ASSOCIATES JOIN LINKEDIN

Members-only forum to start in September

ASCL Associates and Professional Associates are to have a dedicated space on the LinkedIn platform, it was announced at the May meeting of the Associates committee.

It will be a closed, members-only forum where members can post relevant and up-to-date articles, ask questions, share comments and make suggestions for an active and engaged retirement. It is due to launch in September 2026.

A new committee chair and vice-chair have been voted in with Peter Crowe and Alan Brady taking on the roles. Pauline Thomas had indicated her wish to step down as chair at the end of the academic year and was thanked for her contribution.

A new series of podcasts is being recorded which was due to become available from June 2026. The first one features a Professional Associate, who describes his extensive experience of school leadership and as an education consultant and ASCL Professional Associate. Members expressed hope this would be the first of many interesting programmes and ideas about topics and potential interviewees would be welcome.

There is mixed news on the pension front. It is still clear that progress is not being made on sorting out the backlog of pension calculations and issues. This continues to cause stress and problems for many members. The Pension Commission said in an interim report that radical pension reform was needed.

On a more positive note, the Pension Gender Gap has reduced to 32.9%. Still a gap but the trend is positive.

See Pensions - McCloud rumbles on, p8

There has been a good level of interest among current members of ASCL Council in joining the Associates Committee. An online meeting is to be held to clarify the role and to answer any questions. An election vote may then be needed by the committee.

A good number of the committee were happy to volunteer to attend ASCL events around the country to discuss the work of the Associates and to attract more members.

February meeting

Changes to GDPR mean that Associate members can now be emailed directly by the ASCL team, the committee heard at its February meeting. The move will help improve communication and recruitment of Associate members.

Theo Nickson gave an update from ASCL Benevolent Fund. Among a number of issues raised, Theo said people are contacting the fund because they are lonely and value having a "friendly ear" to talk to. One action agreed is to explore with ASCL marketing team whether a link to support from Age UK could be posted on the ASCL website as the charity has strategies in place to help combat loneliness and isolation.

Pensions is still a hot topic but there have been positive steps to make the system fairer for LGPS members. Teachers' Pensions, however, still have long delays in dealing with claimants needing information and members agreed it remains an "unacceptable" service.

Blue Light Card scheme

Retired teachers and headteachers are now eligible for the Blue Light Card, a discount scheme for people working in the teaching community, emergency services, armed forces and social care.

The scheme offers money off goods and services with a huge range of companies, including phones, utilities, food and drink, gym memberships and travel.

The card costs £4.99 for two years. Go to www.bluelightcard.co.uk for details



Credit: <https://www.bluelightcard.co.uk/en>

FEEDBACK SOUGHT FROM MEMBERS

Editorial Committee asks for email views on newsletter's development



Associate editorial committee from left to right:

Pauline Thomas, Peter Crowe and Patsy Kane.

The Associates Editorial Committee is asking for direct member feedback to help shape the content of *Associates News* and reflect the wide variety of issues and activities that people are engaged in.

It was agreed at the May meeting to ask people to email their views and ideas which will be passed to the committee to help inform the newsletter's development. Anyone wishing to contribute can email corporateadmin@ascl.org.uk, putting "Associates News" in the email header.

Patsy Kane was elected chair of the Associates editorial committee at the meeting. She takes over from Peter Crowe who is the new chair of the Associates main committee (see separate story).

After reviewing the content for the summer edition, members discussed coverage of Associates' events and other topics for future issues. Ideas for a potential outing in the autumn term included the disused but fascinating

Tube stations in London and Leicester Cathedral, where the remains of Richard III are buried and which has a new heritage and learning centre with exhibitions on the cathedral and wider city.

Book recommendations either for fiction and general reading or on the theme of places to visit were suggested as regular slots.

Members also reflected on the wonderful contributions over several issues on the history of ASCL by Rich Atterton. Editor Julie Nightingale will ask him for further contributions.

Finally, the editorial group would love members' feedback on the newsletter and suggestions for content ideas reflecting the wide variety of issues and activities that people are engaged in.

February meeting

Earlier in the year, a health and wellbeing column to keep readers active and healthy and to provide inspiration for and from members was

discussed at the committee meeting in February.

More articles from readers and contributions for the Out and About section of *Associates News* to ensure the events highlighted cover the whole country would also be welcome.

Julie asked for members submitting articles to include images with their copy and to ensure, if possible, that the images are high-resolution so that they print well. (See guidance on images, below/opposite.)

Plans were also discussed to review ASCL's *Moving On*, the ASCL guide to retirement, with any comments and reader feedback welcomed.

The committee members are: Patsy Kane (chair), Peter Crowe, Pauline Thomas, Julie Nightingale (editor), Misbah Daud (production). Minutes: Sarah Peterson.

WE WANT YOUR PICS

If you're sending us your photos, remember these technical basics

We're always looking for stories, experiences and views from members. Whether it's a new role or hobby you've taken up in retirement, a memory or anecdote from your days working in schools that you think would resonate with others or just an idea you think we should be covering, let us know.

Images to go with your piece are definitely welcome. Here are a few things to bear in mind when sending in your pictures:



Credit iStock

- Who took the image? They own the copyright so we need their permission to publish it and to give them a credit on the page. If we don't have permission, they might charge us! Or, even worse, sue us.
- Pictures found on websites and social media aren't usable, unless they are copyright-free. On Google you can search for copy-right free images by going to Google Images/Tools/Usage rights and clicking on Creative Commons licenses. But see next point . . .
- Because Associates News is primarily a print publication, we need high resolution (good quality) images which means the image file sizes will be big – in MB (megabytes) rather than KB (kilobytes). If you are asking people to send you pictures, please ask them to send high-resolution (hi-res) images and check the file sizes are in excess of 1MB.
- If you are taking pictures on your own phone or digital camera, you can adjust the settings to ensure you capture a hi-res image. Go to your camera app and look for Settings (wheel icon). You should see an option that says something like 'Photo resolution'. Ensure it is set to 'Full' or 'High' or something similar. (Bear in mind high resolution images take longer to send on your phone to someone else because the files are large.)
- Always bear in mind that huge files can clog up your – and other peoples' – mailboxes if you're emailing them. Files over 8MB or so can easily be sent via a free online service that distributes enormous files, such as WeTransfer and others.
- Don't be tempted to use filters and artistic effects. Pure images work best.
- Try to take a mixture of landscape (wide and sideways) and portrait (narrow and tall) pictures to help us make the most of your contributions.
- If you can, and if it's appropriate to the story, pictures with people in them are preferable to views and landscapes.

WORDSEARCH – BILLS

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| ◇ ANDERSON | ◇ MEDLEY |
| ◇ BELICHICK | ◇ MONROE |
| ◇ BELLAMY | ◇ NIGHY |
| ◇ BIXBY | ◇ NYE |
| ◇ CODY | ◇ PAXTON |
| ◇ GRAHAM | ◇ REHNQUIST |
| ◇ HADER | ◇ ROBINSON |
| ◇ HALEY | ◇ WALTON |
| ◇ MAHER | ◇ WILSON |

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MCCLLOUD RUMBLES ON

The McCloud Remedy was meant to iron out an inequality in the pension system but delays and poor communication have lead to disquiet among retirees. Melanie Moffatt clarifies what is happening

I had hoped that the last article I wrote mentioning the McCloud Remedy would be my last, but alas, here we are mid-2026 with further delays and no clear resolution in sight.

Many retired teachers affected by the McCloud transitional remedy are still waiting to receive their Remedial Pension Savings Statements (RPSS) from the Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS) and others who have elected to make changes have yet to see them take effect.

Unfortunately, the situation has been compounded by misleading reports and commentary, particularly online and on social media. In some cases, these appear to have been designed to provoke fear and anger rather than provide clarity.

It has led to a surge of enquiries and complaints to TPS, which, while entirely understandable, risks diverting limited resources away from the essential work of producing statements and resolving cases.

In light of the ongoing narrative around this issue, it is important to be clear about what the McCloud remedy is, and what it is not.

Giving people options

The remedy is designed to address age discrimination identified in the McCloud court case by ensuring that affected members have been afforded the option to choose between legacy and reformed pension schemes for the remedy period 2015 to 2022.

It is not a compensation scheme and

there is no guarantee that any money is owed. While some members may see an adjustment to their pension benefit that does result in receiving a payment, in many cases, there will be no financial change at all.

The delayed statements in question relate to members who retired prior to the implementation of the remedy in October 2023 and are already receiving a pension. Members heading towards retirement now will not be affected by these delays and, in the majority of cases, new retirement payments are being made on time.

The situation has been compounded by misleading reports online

Frustrating delays

We recognise that these delays are frustrating and, for some members, deeply stressful. The length of time taken to issue the statements is unacceptable, and we continue to press TPS and the Department for Education to speed up the process and improve communication with members.

Alongside the ongoing remedy challenges, I previously reported that Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) will be taking over administration of TPS from Capita. This change was due to happen in June but has been deferred until later

in the year. We believe this is a sensible decision, as it allows TPS to focus on delivering their summer retirement project at their busiest time of year, without distraction.

TCS representatives have already been engaging constructively in union meetings. They have expressed a clear commitment to maintaining positive working relationships with us and to listening to feedback from member representatives.

We hope this will translate into tangible improvements over time, particularly in areas where Capita has struggled to meet members' expectations.

We will continue to monitor progress closely and will of course keep members updated.

Melanie Moffatt is ASCL Pensions Specialist.

Watch her short video on the gender pay gap for pensions, as featured in the last issue of Associates News, here

<https://vimeo.com/1189731246>

**Melanie Moffatt
is ASCL Pensions
Specialist**



LIVING MEMORIES

The National Memorial Arboretum was the venue for the Associates reunion in May. Alan Brady, who led the group along with fellow Associate and Arboretum volunteer Rachel Burtenshaw, reports from the front line

Associates gathered at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire for the May reunion.

After attending the Daily Act of Remembrance in the Millennium Chapel of Peace and Reconciliation, we heard a short introductory talk about the foundation of the Arboretum which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

It was the brainchild of former naval Commander David Childs who, back in the 1990s, felt that the country needed a place of remembrance that was open year-round.

He campaigned for support and funding and eventually was offered land in the newly-created National Forest in the heart of England. The land was supplied by a local gravel extraction company for the princely sum of £1 a year for 999 years.

The first trees were planted in the late 1990s and the Arboretum officially opened in May 2001; the first memorial was the iconic hardwood Polar Bear figure dedicated to the 49th (West Riding) Infantry Division.

We then enjoyed a land train drive through the Arboretum. At the eastern edge, there's the very moving Shot at Dawn memorial, commemorating the more than 300 young soldiers executed in the First World War for cowardice or desertion.

We were given a very interesting talk by a volunteer who described the campaign to pardon the soldiers who were executed in a very different time in history from ours.

The pardons were achieved in 2006. It was very moving to see the young ages of most of those soldiers who died.

We walked back to the visitors centre passing by many memorials including the Household Division of the British Army, the Railway Memorial and a memorial to World War Two evacuees entitled *'Every Which Way'*.

The Far East

We walked through the open gates of one of the liberated *'Stalag'* concentration camps, past the many RAF and Royal Navy memorials and the new tribute to members of the LGBT+ community who died serving their country.

After lunch, we went to the western side of the Arboretum to the Far East Prisoners of War (FEPOW) memorial. Again, we had a very interesting talk by a volunteer about the British and Commonwealth experience in the war in the Far East.

We explored the Far East Prisoners of War museum and saw two pieces of railway track commemorating the Burma and Sumatra Railways and the enormous human misery that is associated with those endeavours.

There are more than 420 memorials set in a beautiful site of more than 150 acres which contains over 25,000 trees.

Armed Forces Memorial

Our final stop of the day was the iconic Armed Forces Memorial which is the biggest memorial on the site. It opened in 2007 and is dedicated to the men and women of the Armed Forces who

have died on duty since the end of the Second World War. More than 16,200 names are commemorated on its walls.

The UK and its allies have been involved in more than 47 conflicts since the end of the Second World War. Within the memorial are two stunning bronze sculptures created by the sculptor Ian Rank-Broadley detailing loss and sacrifice.

There is also a gap in the wall where, on 11 November each year, if the sun is shining, a shaft of light falls right through the memorial onto the central wreath.

We ended our time together with a very welcoming cup of tea and piece of cake.

National Memorial Arboretum www.thenma.org.uk



The Armed Forces Memorial – more than 16,200 names are commemorated on its walls. Credit: National Memorial Arboretum

TELL YOUR TALES

Take part in our first short story competition and raise money for the ASCL Benevolent Fund



Associates News is launching a short story competition for members so if you have a powerful tale you're yearning to tell now's your chance.

Is there an incident in your working or family life that once sparked an idea you always meant to follow up?

Have you read a news story that you think could be fleshed out in fiction?

Have you met or dreamt of a character whose adventure you think you could capture?

If so, put your pen to paper/cursor to screen and share your imaginative powers with readers.

Send us an original piece of fiction of up to 1,000 words for potential publication on the Associates section of the ASCL website.

The judges will be drawn from the ASCL Associates Committee.

Entries cost £5 with money raised going to the ASCL Benevolent Fund and the winning entry will be published in a future edition of Associates News

To enter, submit your story on a Word document and submit a **separate** document with your name and email address. Please do not include your name anywhere in the story document as entries need to be anonymous when they are passed to the judges.

Send your entries to: **corporateadmin@ascl.org.uk** and put 'Associates Short Story Competition' in the email header.

The closing date is Tuesday September 15

So get writing!

Rules

- Entries must be a fictional short story on any theme.
- Entries must be page numbered with the story title on the first page.
- All entries must be the original work of the author and must not have been published before the date of submission.
- All entries must be accompanied by the author's name, address and telephone number which must be included on a separate page.
- Please do not include your name anywhere in the story document. Author details must be submitted on a separate page.
- Only one story per writer can be submitted in this competition.
- Entries received after the closing date will not be considered.
- Authors must keep a copy of their entry, manuscripts cannot be returned.
- The judges' view is final and no correspondence will be entered into in connection with the decision on winners.
- Prize-winning stories will be published on the ASCL website. The author retains the copyright for their story but by entering the competition, the author gives the publisher their consent to reproduce the story on the website.
- Entries can be made by email as a Word document (PDFs cannot be accepted).
- Receipt of all entries will be acknowledged by email.
- Entries must not be generated using AI technology.
- The author is responsible for seeking permission to reproduce any material that adds to the context of the story such as song lyrics, poetry or quotes.

INNER PEACE AND QUIET

With no Glastonbury this year, it's time to take a trip to a very different kind of festival where the emphasis is not on loud music, and hedonism, but on revivifying smoothies, wild swimming and immersive gardening. It's only reiki and roll-up yoga mats, but you'll like it



Outdoor yoga is one of many activities regularly enjoyed at wellness festivals Credit iStock

They may come across as a little 'woo-woo' to the uninitiated, but wellness events are springing up in serene and suitably sustainable rural locations across the country.

Seasoned festival-goers are invited to

swap indie guitars for wind chimes and mosh pit mad dancing for percussion workshops in woodland clearings in a bid to embrace spiritual calm. The toilets are also likely to be an altogether more wholesome experience from what they have used in the past.

There's also plenty for the casually curious get-away-from-it-all weekenders to do as well as they search for 'present-moment awareness' by 'letting go of perfection' and indulging in a little light mindfulness and 'plant-forward' pasties.



Suffolk Wellness in the Wild Festival. Credit Unearthed Creative

Topping the bill this summer is The Big Retreat held at Abotts Ripton in Cambridgeshire, 11-13 September, where tickets are £269 per person.

Organisers have planned a weekend's worth of workshops and 'curated experiences' designed to improve and understand mental health. These are backed up by a programme of fitness and outdoor adventure activities and specialised areas such as Mind Space, Tangled Woods and the Feel-Good Field. Live music and superstar DJs provide an appropriately chilled vibe.

The Happy Place Festival, founded by self-help podcast queen Fearn Cotton, is two days of yoga, performances, food, journaling and insights into giving and receiving constructive feedback.

It runs at the Old Deer Park in London (11-12 July) and Tatton Park, Cheshire

(5-6 Sept), from £49.50 for a day and £88 for a weekend pass.

The London line-up includes Ruby Wax, Olivia Bowen, Matt Haig, Tulisa and Jordan Stephens while *Celebs Go Dating's* Tom Read Wilson is the star attraction in Cheshire.

Other dates for your internal clarity diary include the Kent Wellness Festival (Detling Showground, 13-14 June, £27.80 for one day, £52.17 for the weekend) which brings together exhibitors from across the wellness industry.

Wellness in the Wild, Suffolk (7-9 August, £55 for one day and from £140 for the weekend, plus added extras) is a three-day extravaganza of balance-restoring activities including trail runs, talks, workshops, live music, sound baths and breathwork sessions.

Those who turn a nose up at roughing it, should know that the site also features a woodland spa, wood-fired hot tubs, saunas, massages and bespoke holistic therapies.

Finally, wake up and smell the roses at the inaugural RHS Badminton Flower Show (8-12 July at the Badminton Estate in Gloucestershire, £56.50 for adults and £20 for children).

Replacing the Hampton Court Palace Garden Festival for 2026, the event features innovative gardens, presentations, a floral marquee, plant villages and lakeside music.





Exercise can bring a range of benefits beyond the physical, says health psychology specialist Rachael Hewitt

It's hard work getting old...

These are the words of an active and engaged 97-year-old who recently gained the title of being one half of the oldest couple to get married in Manchester.

While achieving a ripe old age is important to many of us, this example serves as a helpful reminder to that we should all try to maximise our healthy years and prioritise positive engagement with life and those around us.

It's easy to forget that retirement is a major life event and involves a period(s) of change, transition and adaptation. Some people take to retirement like a duck to water but for others adjusting to a new, often slower pace of life can be daunting and challenging.

The three pillars of good health are physical, mental and social wellbeing. In retirement, a good exercise routine can contribute to all three. Regular movement can help to prevent falls, reduce the health risks associated with too much sitting (such as obesity, type 2 diabetes and heart disease), lower stress, improve mood and keep our minds sharp.

Social network

From a behavioural perspective, exercise can help us to find a new

routine and give structure to our days and weeks when we no longer have to work for eight hours a day. Taking part in sport and exercise also supports our social wellbeing by preventing social isolation and feelings of loneliness that may creep in in the absence of chats in the office with colleagues and work meetings and events. Joining a class, group or team can help to expand our social network and lead to new, potentially lasting friendships.

We all have different priorities, and we need to work with these in mind. No matter what you do, the key is to start small and focus on doing little and often. If you're new to exercise, this could be building in movement to everyday activities, whether that's gardening, housework or looking after the grandkids.

Nowadays, there's a lot of talk about the importance of weights and resistance training, especially as we age. Building muscle and strength can help to reduce our risk of falls, improve our balance and contribute to a strong immune system, alongside all the psychological benefits. You can do weights at home, in a class or in a gym. It's good to ask for support from an expert so you have a good technique and push yourself beyond any plateau.

Keep motivated

It's easy to be put off, but the support of a friend or coach can keep you motivated, accountable and make meaningful progress in whatever type of activity you choose to do.

It's helpful to view retirement as an exciting opportunity to try, and experiment with, new things. Finding activities that you enjoy is essential as the more you enjoy an activity, the more you are likely to keep doing it. You won't like everything, but if you stay open-minded and have a "can do" attitude, you may just surprise yourself.

Ultimately, it's important to focus on the little steps which contribute to bigger changes longer term. And remember, it's never too late to start – changes and improvements can be made at any age providing you feel ready, willing and able.

Dr Rachael Hewitt has a PhD in Health Psychology and is a fitness coach. She was in conversation with Patsy Kane.

Consult your GP before embarking on an exercise programme, especially if you have a medical condition, injury, or other health concerns.



Colin Jackson CBE delivering keynote at ASCL Annual Conference. Credit: Paul Francis

LOVE LIVERPOOL

The Education Secretary was well received, Ofsted less so, Frank Cottrell-Boyce talked a different kind of tick-tock and Colin Jackson was hero-worshipped. Peter Crowe reports with an Associate's eye from ASCL's Annual Conference

I set off from the East Midlands with a good friend and colleague, Peter Monk, who, having just had a second hip operation, was negotiating the journey, the neighbouring hotel and the ACC Liverpool conference centre on crutches!

Friday morning began with a powerful message of hope from ASCL President Jo Rowley, followed by a nervously assertive head of Ofsted, Sir Martyn Oliver. Sir Martyn was clear about the 'why' of Ofsted which, he said, was there to promote and protect the interests of pupils and ensure that they got the best deal. He said he made no apology for the new Ofsted framework which, he felt, offered an honest assessment of where a school is at and, what it needs to do next.

He acknowledged the need for inspectors to appreciate the context of a school but insisted that that would not lead to a "lowering of the bar of expectation". There should also

be a laser-like focus on the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children.

He spoke about the new report cards which should recognise and celebrate achievement and success but not play down disappointing outcomes.

For the most part, he was listened to with polite, though frosty, silence and the applause at the end of his talk was muted and dutiful rather than enthusiastic. He left the auditorium and the conference quickly without taking any questions.

Upbeat presentation

After a brief introduction from Gurpall Badesha, our new vice-president, Bridget Phillipson, Secretary of State for Education, took to the stage for a much more upbeat presentation. She spoke with real passion and enthusiasm about tackling the challenges ahead and with verve and fluency about education being back at the centre of the national debate. She referred to the perils

and possibilities of social media and introduced us to the "vulnerable girl" for whom she wanted to "change the weather".

She was very keen to fight the creeping curse of child poverty which she felt might be combated through creating a 'village around the child'. She was, like her predecessors, keen on high standards and inclusion, but she has also courageously tried to grasp the nettle of the bloated, grotesquely underfunded SEND system she has inherited.

Delegates were uplifted and inspired by her enthusiasm, authenticity and commitment but were left wondering where the resources for such ambition were going to come from as she faces such fiercely competing demands from so many other government departments.

After a short break and the chance to wander through the impressive exhibition concourse, we settled



Katriona O'Sullivan delivering keynote at ASCL Annual Conference. Credit: Paul Francis

down to much lighter fare with the effervescent Colin Jackson who spoke with great heart and searing honesty about his incredible athletics career, centred on the 110 metres hurdles.

He was able to reflect on his successes, including his long-standing world record and his incredible bronze medal at the Seoul Olympics. There were also the lows, such as the crushing disappointment of last-minute injury and being unable to secure Olympic gold in Barcelona, for which he had been the favourite, before finally bestriding his event as a peerless world champion. Colin stayed on and took a full part in the conference showing infinite patience and good humour as many delegates lined up for group selfies with their boyhood hero.

He endured it all with a beaming smile and without ever taking himself too seriously.

The conference featured a variety of workshops and I enjoyed a fascinating session on *'unblocking talent pipelines'* from Amy Whittall, Executive Director of the Mercian Trust, and Dr Jim Rogers, leadership coach with Mercian. My takeaway was the importance of developing a positive culture prior to setting strategic direction as well as Jim's wonderful *'people project'* aimed at

recruiting, retaining and developing all their staff and volunteers.

Jim also reflected on the subtle but powerful difference between simply *'belonging'* to an organisation as opposed to *'mattering'* and perhaps making a key contribution to its direction of travel.

Day one finished back in the main auditorium with a spellbinding presentation from Professor Katriona O'Sullivan of Maynooth University, Country Kildare, who also works at Trinity College Dublin. Her life journey started in grinding poverty in Coventry as one of five children born to heroin-addicted parents. She moved to Birmingham and - after periods in foster care, in children's homes and homelessness - she became a teenage mum at 15. Despite all this she eventually moved to Dublin in Ireland where she completed her PhD in Psychology at Trinity before embarking on her academic career and writing her first book, the bestseller *Poor* (now required reading for my book club).

From the outset of her talk, the air was blue and some of Katriona's early teachers came in for a real pasting - anonymously, of course. Her life story is powerful, compelling and, quite simply, one of the most incredible personal

achievements against unbelievable odds we were ever likely to hear. She had her rapt audience in the palm of her hand and there was hardly a dry eye in the house during some parts of her speech as her tale unfolded.

Day one ended with a networking wine reception which was informal and entertaining and I felt it suited ASCL General Secretary Pepe Di'lasio's style and approach down to the ground.

'Essential glue'

Day two opened with Pepe's address which was short, sweet and hard-hitting. He crafted a hilarious new-style Ofsted report card for a Hogwarts-style school which, needless to say, didn't fare all that well against modern accountability measures. He went on to praise the laudable plans outlined by Bridget Phillipson the previous day but wondered about delivery. He also reflected on the clear and present dangers of deepening prejudice and damaging divisions in our society and made a powerful case for education being the *'essential glue'* holding society together in fractious times.

Pepe's overarching theme, however, was the importance of kindness in society and schools and of our moral duty to look after each other. He concluded with a lovely quote from the former US First Lady, Michelle Obama: *"When they go low we go high!"*

Frank Cottrell-Boyce was up next and it was a real pleasure to listen as he described the part teachers play in *'paying forward'*, investing in children's futures and creating vital *'invisible capital'*. Unsurprisingly, the multi award-winning children's author and Children's Laureate talked about the importance of reading and its power to slow everything down. Rhythm is everything, he said, as we strive to understand and treasure the *"tick-tock of our hearts"*.

Our next keynote was from Sal Naseem, a senior associate fellow at thinktank the Police Foundation and former director for London at the

Independent Office for Police Conduct, a role in which he had to deal with some of the most difficult high-profile cases facing the Metropolitan Police.

Sal spoke with great poise and authority about the need to challenge discrimination in all its forms. Having witnessed depressing and distressing behaviour on so many marches from members of various political extremes he also warned us of the dangers of feeling hopeless, powerless and pessimistic in the face of such challenges, stressing that we must act and be *"agents of hope"*.

Moral courage

He talked about his core values and the need to exhibit moral courage, aspects of which include challenging unethical behaviours, owning our mistakes, and being champions of change.

Ethics and values were also central to the next keynote from Evelyn Forde, former headteacher and recent past-President of ASCL. She talked about her core purpose as a leader, including protecting staff and children and reflected on her early *'invisible'* years and the need to be noticed. The quiet power of authentic leadership is discussed more fully in her recent book *Herstory: A Leadership Manifesto* which explores the lived experiences of black leaders and the barriers that they face.

Between keynotes, I went to a fascinating workshop on Pupil Premium, led by Mark Rowland. As all schools strive to deconstruct that stubborn barrier to *'peer equivalent'* success faced

by disadvantaged children, Mark prefers the more positive notion of social and academic inclusion so that all children have choice, empowerment and

us on a fascinating journey through the colourful world of words and language together with the art of successful communication.

As we headed back to the East Midlands on Saturday afternoon, with Peter assuring me that the pain involved in two or three miles of hopping around on crutches was all worth it, we reflected on another superbly organised, uplifting and inspiring conference. ASCL staff had worked all hours God sent to ensure that every aspect of the conference ran smoothly and without a hitch.

As a long-retired Associate, I was able to luxuriate in the joy of involvement and engagement in the *'cut and thrust'* of the latest debate about modern education without having to return to the chalkface and put all those excellent ideas into action . . . though I do still try to make a positive contribution to the work of my local multi-academy trust as a dedicated volunteer. I was able to bring back a feast of positive ideas and strategies for them whether they want them or not!



The exhibition at ASCL's Annual Conference. Credit: Paul Francis



Chris Hildrew, ASCL Council member, in conversation with Susie Dent, writer and broadcaster. Credit: Paul Francis

opportunity rather than the mechanistic strategy of simply closing the gap.

Our final session was a conversation with Susie Dent the engaging and high-profile TV presenter on *Countdown* and *Secret Genius with Alan Carr*. Susie took



THE DREAMY 'SPIRES'

Delightful delphiniums – the perennials come in a variety of colours. Credit: Howard Norton

Howard Norton describes how the chance discovery of a single delphinium plant in a delict garden led to many years of horticultural pleasure



We moved into our present house in 1990. It was great, but the garden gave the appearance of a builder's yard; we discovered one laurel bush, one leylandii, one Bramley Apple sapling, a peony and a delphinium plant.

In the summer when the delphinium came into flower, I noticed that our next-door neighbour also had one flowering. Both flowers were blue but one had a white eye and the other a black eye.

They are like cathedral spires, standing tall with great structure in the border. They are perennials and come in a variety of colours.

However, my efforts to grow them didn't bring success, and our neighbour had been taking note of my failures. One day, he asked if I would like to be his guest at our local horticultural association meeting where the speaker was a member of the executive committee of the Delphinium Society.

He suggested that I bought some named cultivars of the Elatum Hybrid delphiniums from a specialist nursery and also join the society.

I took his advice and have never looked back! The Patron of the Delphinium Society is King Charles III. If you ever get the chance to visit his garden at Highgrove, Gloucestershire during June and July, you will be in no doubt he has a passion for delphiniums.

My wife Wendy and I travelled to RHS

Wisley for society meetings and shows where we learned so much.

Best in Show

We were encouraged to show which we did on a few occasions, and we also volunteered to help run the society's stand at Chelsea Flower Show for a number of years.

We bought some of the society's hand-pollinated seed and we showed one seedling I raised at the Northern Show in Leeds in 2011.

'Norfolk White' was awarded first place in its class, Best Seedling in Show and – out of 98 entries – overall Best in Show.

I became properly hooked on breeding and raising new cultivars. Over the years, I have been able to introduce a number of really delightful new plants in a range of colours.

I trial them for a few years to check that they are worthy to be given names that are registered in the International Delphinium Register kept by the Royal Horticultural Society.

A number of delphinium growers in Norfolk agreed to start a regional association of the society, the Eastern England (East Anglia) Group. My colleagues invited me to be chairman, and I served in that position for many years.

The opportunity also arose for me to join the speakers list for both the Delphinium Society and the Norfolk and Norwich Horticultural Society.

Informal dialogue

Most clubs ask their speakers to talk for up to an hour followed by a question-and-answer session. Having been a teacher, I preferred the informal dialogue approach rather than a straight lecture.

As part of my introduction, I would ask the audience how they first came into gardening. Most folk would point to a parent or grandparent who inspired and encouraged them which was my story, too.

One occasion still moves me deeply. I was giving my presentation to a club in East Norfolk not far from Great Yarmouth. One of my slides is a photograph of the cultivar, 'Our Pippa', named after our daughter who sadly died in 2012 from T-cell lymphoma.

In passing, I mentioned that my fee for the evening would be donated to the Lymphoma Research Trust. Just as I was taking my last bag out to the car, the chairman asked me to return.

I was then taken aback by a short speech by the chairman to say that the members had had a whip round and wished for their collection of £28 to be given to the Lymphoma Research Trust. What spontaneous generosity!

Sadly, age and Covid brought these delightful visits to an end.

Howard Norton was second deputy head at Hewett School, Norwich, 1977-1981 and head of Costessey High School, Norwich, 1981-1984.

PODCAST HIGHLIGHTS



ASCL's Emma Harrison hears how AI is already shaping learning at one multi-academy trust

ASCL Business Leadership Specialist Emma Harrison was given a glimpse of the future when she talked with James Browning, chief operating officer of the Lift Schools national multi-academy trust, about AI and all things digital for a recent Business Brunch podcast.

James moved into the sector after a career in education technology and described how AI was used across the 50+ Lift schools across the UK where the emphasis was very much on learning, self-identity and education pathways.

He added that transparency was a key element of the implementation of any new technology.

"It's important that we share the good

things and the challenges that we face with digital," he said. "There's a balance between risks and rewards; we all know, for example, the issues surrounding mobile phone use and social media."

He added that the potential of AI in the school environment 'relit my fire about technology'.

James, who also sits on a Department for Education working group on AI, said that a guiding principle of its implementation across the trust's strategy was that it should support – and not replace – teaching methods.

"AI can personalise learning by helping to support the individual and promoting innovation, but we have to be careful to ensure that we safeguard creativity

in, for example, music and the arts."

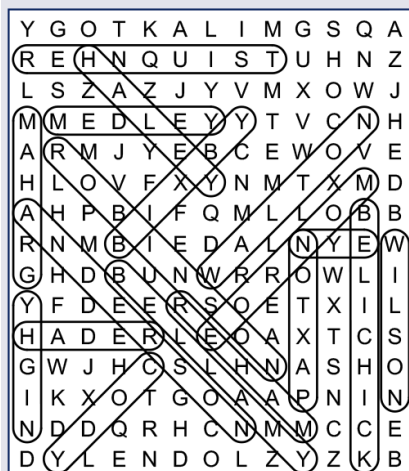
In a recent edition of ASCL 150: Leadership Legacies, former general secretary Geoff Barton talked to Caroline Lowing, Head of Thornden School, a secondary school with academy status in Chandlers Ford, Hampshire.

"One thing about leadership that we don't talk about enough is knowing stuff," she said. "We talk a lot about values, but I would like to be known as someone who knows stuff. I've always been about teaching and learning; when I first became a head, people said that it was unusual for them to hear a leader talking about that so much."

Listen to all of the discussions at www.ascl.org.uk/News/Podcasts.

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