

Arion visit 15,02 – Developing School Leadership 11 – 15 October 2004

Location: Llanelli, West Wales

Co-ordinators: Ms Christine Henshaw and Ms Polly Seton, Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire LEAs.

I travelled to Wales to meet the hosts and participants and to observe the first day.

The visit was organised by Christine Henshaw and Polly Seaton and took place in Llanelli, the Rugby capital of Wales. They were very helpful and ensured that everyone felt welcome. The hotel was comfortable and reasonably priced with conference facilities, restaurant and a bar, so the group had plenty of opportunity for informal discussions and networking.

As far as I am aware, this is the only Arion visit to be hosted in Wales this year. The group consisted of 21 delegates from 15 different countries with a diverse range of experience and backgrounds; including a head teacher from Guadeloupe and an education manager from Turkey. The Turkish participant's visa had finally arrived the previous day thanks to Christine's perseverance in ringing and faxing the Embassy.

The room the group was based in was in the hotel and the hosts had displayed flags from each participant's country and written "welcome" in the different languages on the screen. It struck me immediately how proud the Welsh are of their language and culture and the welcome dinner included various Welsh foods; cheese, lamb and leeks. In addition, we were entertained during lunch by a pupil playing a harp.

The programme was very varied with a good mixture of presentations, visits, time for formal and informal discussion together with some cultural activities. The organisers had managed to arrange for various high level people to participate including; Jane Davidson, Welsh Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, several head teachers and LEA personnel. In addition, a journalist from the local paper was expected to attend.

Christine explained that the visit was going to be hard work, but informal and hopefully fun. They therefore started off with a small ice-breaker game which forced them to talk!

Officials from Ceredigion and Camarthenshire LEAs gave the group some background information about Wales, the Welsh Assembly and education system together with some current issues, such as bilingual teaching, declining pupil numbers, remodelling teaching – i.e. administrators or teaching assistants undertaking tasks to lighten teachers' load. An interesting discussion sprung up where participants talked about similar issues in their countries.

Jane Davidson talked enthusiastically about international cooperation. She mentioned Wales' eagerness to benchmark itself against similar systems and to learn from other countries and vice versa,. E.g. The New Zealand government is interested in providing more facilities for the Maoris so a delegation will be visiting Wales to study their bilingual education provision, simultaneous translation at conferences etc. Delegates had the opportunity to ask questions and to meet the minister afterwards. They were very impressed by her accessibility and willingness to spend time talking to them. In general, all of the presenters I heard were enthusiastic and encouraged delegates to ask questions, comment on what they heard and to compare and contrast with their systems. Each started with a few words in Welsh.

This particular week was selected to coincide with the final stage of "Roots and Wings" a trilateral leadership programme to share good practice between Wales, Tuscany and Denmark. Within the programme head teachers visited each country to study the different systems, share ideas, bounce ideas off each other and look at their own practices through the eyes of their foreign colleagues. In addition, they learned what it was like to be coached.

The Arion group was invited to attend their dissemination conference and heard a presentation on their achievements, on aspects which could have been more successful and the sustainability of their work. This material was directly relevant to the Arion group for their field trips and discussions during the visit and afterwards. The Roots and Wings team and Arion group had opportunities to discuss areas of interest with one another during the week and I am sure these will have generated lots of ideas.

I was very pleased to have been invited to attend the beginning of this excellent visit – judging by the presentations I heard, I am sure that it was a great success. The group was already beginning to gel on the first evening, and as I left I heard some very lively discussions.