

# PARENT COUNCIL RESOURCE

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## Section 6 – Consulting with parents and the wider community

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## 6. Consulting with parents and the wider community

Consultation is the term used to mean asking for opinion and feedback. This can be done informally, using a simple poll or conversation, or more formally with written questionnaires to gather views on a school's policy such as behaviour management or school uniform policies. Consultation can also be around gathering information for example on the best time to hold a Parent Council meeting.

Meaningful consultation is a worthwhile exercise because it presents an opportunity for parents to get actively involved in dialogue with the setting or school about a variety of matters that affect them, their children and the wider learning community. It is a way of finding out what their views and ideas are, and making sure the setting or school is aware of these so that they can be taken into account when decisions are made.

Encouraging and supporting parents to share their views, ideas and ensure they influence what happens at the setting or school, benefits everyone involved. Consultation should be a two-way process. Parent Councils can:

- talk and listen to each other about concerns or education related matters that have been raised;
- seek the views of others such as the wider parent forum, pupils and the community before making decisions;
- report back to parents on the outcome of any consultation and how their views have been taken into account, in a timely manner.

Parents have a unique knowledge of their own child, valuable life experience and personal skills, as well as energy, creativity and a vested interest in making sure the setting or school is working well. Helping parents to feed in their views and ideas on a variety of educational issues, so that they are involved in educational planning and decision-making, will enrich children's educational experiences and help to ensure the setting or school is responsive to its local community's needs.

Your Parent Council has an important role to play in helping to create an environment where all parents know their views matter and they feel comfortable putting these forward.

Sharing parents' views with the Headteacher and staff, ensuring those views are listened to and taken into account, will be possible if the Parent Council and the setting or school have a positive working partnership. From the outset it is important that the Parent Council and the setting or school share a joint commitment to seek parents' views and ideas, and to ensure that these make a real difference.

Each setting or school and learning community is unique and there are a wide range of educational issues on which parents may wish to feed in their views. Parents should feel able to contribute and are confident to do so. Your Parent Council and setting or school can work in partnership to create an environment that supports this.

There are a wide range of ways to gain the views of parents and find out what is important to them. This guidance aims to help Parent Councils decide when to consult with the parent forum, what issues to consult on, and consider appropriate methods for consulting.

It is important that consultations are meaningful for those involved. The points below will help Parent Councils ensure that the parent forum know why their views and ideas are being sought. All parents should have the opportunity to put their views forward and understand how these will be taken into account.

Carrying out more formal consultations can help to ensure that obtaining parents' views becomes an integral part of the setting or school's decision-making process. Consultation provides a systematic way of collecting and measuring parents' views, which makes it easier to give those views prominence and ensure they are heard and taken into account.

## 6.1 Planning a consultation

When planning a consultation, Parent Council's may wish to consider the following reflective questions:

- As a Parent Council, what do you want to achieve as a result of the consultation with the parent forum?

- Is the issue suitable for a public consultation? Parent Councils should not consult on issues about individual pupils, families or teachers.
- Do you require the views of the full parent forum or just a particular group e.g. fathers or parents of children with additional support needs?
- Will the consultation help to make changes or improvements in the setting or school? If the process cannot influence decision-making, it is not a consultation.
- Consultation with parents could become an integral part of preparing and updating the setting or school's Improvement Plan every year.

## 6.2 Gathering and sharing parents' views

Each setting or school's learning community is unique and there is a wide range of educational issues on which parents may wish to contribute their views. These may include:

- how the setting or school communicates with parents;
- supporting delivery of Curriculum for Excellence by tapping into parents' skills, experiences and expertise;
- the processes involved in preparing children for key transitions, e.g. from early learning and childcare to primary, primary to secondary and secondary school to further education or employment<sup>46</sup>
- discussing the opportunities available to children during key periods of their school career, such as the Senior Phase (S4-S6);
- formulating the setting or school's priorities for improvement;
- revising existing setting or school policies and introducing new ones;
- any significant changes (for example, moving to a new setting or school building);
- developing or updating the School Handbook, website, social media pages;
- discussing the secondary school learning opportunities including available courses and exam performance.

Members of the Parent Council should work in partnership with the setting or school to ensure there is a process in place to obtain the views of parents. These could be highlighted in the setting or school calendar each year. For example, consultation with parents could become an integral part of preparing and updating the Improvement Plan every year.

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<sup>46</sup> <https://education.gov.scot/parentzone/my-child/transitions/what-are-transitions>

## 6.3 What should be included in the consultation?

Parents should understand why they are being consulted and how their responses will be used. This information can be communicated in a covering letter, as an introduction to a questionnaire, or perhaps to accompany an invitation to a consultation event such as a focus group or meeting.

Other details to be included in the background information accompanying the consultation could include:

- who is carrying out the consultation and who is being consulted;
- what the Parent Council is consulting on and why it is important;
- what the different options are (if applicable);
- reference to any background information provided;
- how parental responses will be used;
- details outlining the timetable;
- how the results and outcome of the consultation will be fed back;
- contact details to answer any queries relating to the consultation.

## 6.4 Which consultation method is most appropriate?

The consultation method that the Parent Council decides to use will depend on what it wants to find out and what is most suitable for parents. It may be necessary to use a combination of methods.

You should identify any barriers that may make it difficult for particular groups or individuals to take part in a consultation and consider how these can be addressed and overcome.

Consideration should also be given to ways of including parents who live apart.

### **Reflective questions**

- Are there parents in your setting or school learning community who require consultation questions to be translated into another language e.g. Urdu, Polish, British Sign Language, Arabic, Punjabi?
- Do all parents have access to a computer or smart phone or will some require questionnaires and/or invitations to be printed?

- Should in person or online consultation events be held during the day, the evening, or a combination of both?
- How can the Parent Council work with the Pupil Council to obtain the views of pupils in the setting or school?

Time should be allowed to:

- research the issue;
- promote the consultation;
- send out background information;
- give parents time to respond;
- analyse the results;
- communicate the results to parents.

Consultations should be carried out during term time while taking care to avoid particularly busy times such as the start and end of terms.

#### **6.4.1 Surveys**

Surveys are an effective way of finding out the views of stakeholders on a particular issue or subject in a structured way that enables the results to be analysed.

You can:

- use paper questionnaires sent home with pupils and/or handed out at events or in the playground;
- send an email with the questionnaires in the body of the email or as an attachment;
- use online questionnaires;
- use social media platforms.

If an issue is raised as the result of a survey, Parent Councils can use a focus group(s) or a public meeting/event as a way of exploring the issue in more detail.

Each question in the survey should have clear, concise language and avoid jargon and acronyms. Questions should also relate directly to the purpose of the survey. Questionnaires should ideally take no longer than 10 minutes to complete.

There are four different types of questions and a combination of these can be used to create a questionnaire. Before distributing a questionnaire, it is recommended that the survey is piloted or tested with a small group to gather feedback.

*Open questions* – allow parents to respond in their own words. They are good for finding out the views and ideas of stakeholders on a range of issues and to enable respondents to say what they think about the setting or school more generally. Larger numbers of open response questions may take more time to analyse.

*Closed questions* – require one answer or multiple-choice answers. Respondents select pre-set answers. These types of questions are good for finding out the opinions or preferences of stakeholders. Decisions following the consultation could then be made on a majority vote and to build a profile of respondents. Closed questions work well when there are likely to be a lot of responses returned.

*Ranking and rating format questions* – enable stakeholders to rank and rate a list of choices. Unless you are using an online survey tool that analyses the results automatically, this type of question might require additional work to analyse if the response rate is high.

## **Reflective questions**

- Will responses relate directly to the overall purpose of your consultation?
- Will respondents understand the questions and be able to answer them?
- Does each question have clear, concise language, without jargon or acronyms?
- Does the questionnaire use a mixture of open, closed, ranking and rating questions?
- Have you piloted or tested the questionnaire with a small 'control' group?

### **6.4.2 Focus groups**

Focus groups are useful for finding out parents' attitudes, feelings and views on a wide range of issues or policies, e.g. the Homework Policy. They involve small groups of parents (no more than 6-8 people).

In a focus group, a facilitator (the person running the group - usually the Chair) encourages open yet focused discussion about the issue, which can give a deeper insight into the views of parents. The quality of information obtained from a focus group is very different to that obtained through a questionnaire and can be an effective way of exploring an issue in greater detail.

Focus groups should be inclusive and representative. The Parent Council should consider inviting all parents to take part, those who fit the target group, or invite a randomly selected group of parents. If opting for the former and it is anticipated that too many replies to your invitation will be received, consideration could be given to running additional focus groups. Depending on the purpose of the focus group, it may be important to have representation from across different year stages.

Questions should be drafted and tested in advance of the focus group for the facilitator to use. Using open questions in focus groups encourages attendees to provide more detailed information. Providing comfortable surroundings, informal seating arrangements and refreshments will encourage parents to engage in an open discussion.

The role of the facilitator is to manage the discussion and keep it focused. The facilitator should:

- not be involved in the discussion;
- invite attendees to introduce themselves;
- confirm the purpose of the focus group and explain the complete consultation process e.g. any other methods such as questionnaires which are being used;
- start with a 'warm-up' question, something which helps put attendees at ease;
- remain impartial and ensure the discussion stays focused on the purpose of the consultation;
- keep to the time agreed;
- summarise the discussion for participants at the end and explain next steps.

A decision should be taken before the focus group on how the key points will be recorded. Having a note-taker to record the discussion may be an option. Either way, participants should be informed before the conversation begins.

Consideration should be given to how the information from the focus group will be taken into account and any wider consultation that is required thereafter.



## Reflective questions

- Have all parents or a randomly selected group who fit the target audience, been invited to take part?
- Have questions been prepared in advance to ensure you get the information needed?
- Have open questions been used to encourage parents to give more detailed information?
- Has a facilitator been appointed to guide and manage the discussion and ensure it remains focused?
- What arrangements are in place to record the key points arising from the discussions?  
Have participants been informed?
- Will the focus group be held in comfortable surroundings with informal seating arrangements and refreshments to encourage engagement in an open discussion?
- Are arrangements in place to send a summary of the discussion and details of any next steps to all parents?

### 6.4.3 Public meetings / events

Organising a public meeting/event enables more parents to attend than holding a focus group(s).

Note: if a large number of parents attend, some may find it more difficult to speak out.

Arrangements could be made for parents to break into small discussion groups with a facilitator and/or note-taker to record their views.

#### Points to consider

- Book the room well in advance. Check that it is not too big/small and is accessible for everyone. If you would like attendees to break into smaller groups, consider whether tables will be needed.
- Deciding who will Chair the meeting or event in advance is important. The success of a public meeting or event can depend on the Chair's ability to keep to time and ensure discussion remains interesting and focused on the purpose of the consultation. Make sure the Chair is well prepared.
- Decide if you would like to involve other speakers (think about whether there are opportunities for pupils to get involved). Speakers should be briefed in advance.
- Decide who will facilitate group discussions and who will take notes to record the discussions (you could ask Parent Council members) and brief them in advance.

- Plan for any equipment you may need such as a laptop, sound equipment or flipcharts and pens for group discussions. Check whether you need internet access and if this is available in the room or building.
- Prepare questions for the discussion groups in advance. Use open questions to encourage discussion.
- Invite all parents to attend.
- Prepare an agenda and send it out to all parents.
- Check equipment before the event. For example, is the projector working properly? Is the sound equipment working properly? Can visuals be seen from the back of the room?

#### **6.4.4 Informal methods**

Simply asking parents what they think about something can be a really useful and informal method of consultation and used to complement more formal methods. It can be a particularly effective way of finding out the views of parents who find more formal methods of consultation difficult or intimidating.

### **6.5 Analysing the results and feeding back**

Before undertaking a consultation, Parent Councils should consider the reflective questions below.

How will you:

- take the views of parents into account?
- analyse the results of the consultation?
- provide feedback to the Headteacher and the wider parent forum on the results?
- work in partnership with the setting or school to ensure the views of the parent forum are taken into account?
- provide feedback to the Headteacher and the wider parent forum on the final outcome?

The results of any consultation, formal or informal, should be looked at to make sure any issues for parents are identified and plans are made for any actions. This should then be shared with the parent forum in a format that is clear and makes it easy to understand how their feedback will influence change.

Parent Councils should work with staff in their setting or school to ensure that the results of the consultation are taken into account and help, where relevant to influence decision-making.

Parent Councils may wish to consider:

- using Parent Council meetings to discuss the results of the consultation and how they will be taken into account in an open and transparent manner;
- creating a sub-group that includes staff and parents to ensure the results of the consultation, and the views of parents in general, are reflected in decision-making;
- holding a public meeting or event to enable a much larger group of parents and families to influence how the results inform decision-making.

All parents should be made aware of the ways in which their views were taken into account and any decisions that were made as a result of that as well as the rationale behind them. This is important particularly when the final outcome of a consultation may not be what all parents had anticipated or hoped for.

After the consultation exercise, Parent Councils should review the process to consider how successful it was and whether, on reflection, changes should be made in the future.

### **Reflective questions**

- Did the consultation exercise provide the desired information and data?
- Were the right questions asked?
- Were the right people consulted?
- Were the right methods used for the consultation?
- Was the focus group, public meeting or event facilitated and/or chaired well?
- Were parents well supported, able to participate? Did parents receive the relevant background information?
- Did parents have faith in the consultation process?
- Do parents feel their views were listened to and taken into account?
- Are parents likely to participate in future consultations and/or focus group events?
- Do parents feel they received the right amount of feedback?
- How were parental views taken into consideration by the setting or school?

- Was the rationale behind any decisions made as a result of the consultation/focus group event clearly explained and communicated to parents?
- Following on from the consultation/focus group event, did anything change? For example, have parental views been reflected in the Improvement Plan for the setting or school?

### **What it looks like when things go well**

- Parents get information from the setting or school about a range of services and activities available in the community.
- The school and Parent Council of primary schools have positive relationships with the early learning and childcare settings in their community. Parents with children at those settings are welcomed at school and parent activities.
- Information about the setting or school is available in other community venues in particular; libraries, post offices, community centres, doctors' surgeries and shops.
- The setting or school has established relationships with Faith Groups in the area, churches, mosques and temples and is sensitive to religious customs and practices in school.
- Bi-lingual community members support parents for whom English is not their first language in communicating with the setting or school.
- The setting or school accesses additional help for families that need it from a range of other services to support parents and run groups in order to help them support their children's learning. These could include: speech and language therapy; health; educational psychologists; family support teams; Home Link Teams; social work; and Community Learning and Development Teams.
- The setting or school uses other community venues for some of its activities, for example swimming pools, sports and leisure centres, theatres and museums.
- Local businesses contribute to children's learning by offering visits or work placements and coming to the setting or school to talk about their work.
- Local shops and businesses support fundraising events or sponsor particular setting or school activities.
- The setting or school participates in major community events – for example summer fete, carnival or local celebrations.