

Knowing your school: Engaging parents

A series of briefing notes for school governors and trustees from the National Governors' Association produced in association with partners



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This briefing is not about engaging with parents in order to involve them more effectively in supporting their child's learning. Nor is it about how to deal with parental complaints (although the information gleaned from a complaint might also alert governing boards to issues that need consideration). This briefing aims to give governing boards an understanding of their role in: engaging with parents in order to seek their views, taking their views into account in a meaningful way and keeping parents informed.

In March 2016 the Government published its vision for education in England with the white paper: *Educational Excellence Everywhere*. This has generated considerable debate, especially around the role and future of parent governors. While the white paper spelled out the Government's expectation that academies engage meaningfully with parents, it also proposed the removal of the requirement for reserved places for elected parents on the boards of academy trusts. NGA and many other organisations are against this proposed removal and are urging the government to abandon the idea.

For those who use social media, we're using the hashtag: [#keepparentsgoverning](#) with the support of PTA-UK and Parent Councils UK. To find out more, visit: nga.org.uk/campaigns.

All governing boards need to ensure that schools engage well with parents but this is a different issue from the issue of constitution above, that is, the make-up of governing boards, and should not be conflated. Parents who are governing do not *represent* other parents but instead and like all other governors, use their own judgement to make decisions in the interests of pupils.

Acknowledgement: We would like to acknowledge Ian Rowe, Kirkland Rowell Surveys and GL Education Group for his work on the 2012 version of this guidance.

Introduction from NGA Chief Executive, Emma Knights

In order to govern effectively, boards need to know their schools: this is one of NGA's [eight elements of effective governance](#). Engaging with parents is an excellent way for governors and trustees to get to know their school; its strengths, weaknesses and its community. A governing board will want to solicit the views of parents to inform its strategic planning and give parents the opportunity to help shape their child's education, as well as being reflective about school performance and its own effectiveness. A governing board should not have all its information provided by school leaders: Ofsted recommends three sources of evidence and NGA supports this approach.

Governing boards should do everything they can to ensure parents' views are gathered and acted upon appropriately and that the results are reported. This does not mean the governing board always gathers the information itself but it may mean that for some purposes it will be governors and trustees who directly engage with parents.

It can be tricky to establish and maintain a relationship with parents and we very much want to learn from schools that are doing this well. So if you have a story to tell, please do get in touch. The National Governors' Association aims to improve the quality of school governance by supporting, advising and training governors, trustees and clerks. If your school is not a member, please consider joining: www.nga.org.uk

Introduction to PTA UK from Executive Director, Emma Williams

PTA UK offers expert advice for school leaders, governors and parents so that every school can strengthen the cooperation between home and school which, of course, includes benefiting from a successful PTA. Parents absolutely want a say in how their child is educated and on other school policies that affect their family. It's clearly important that there are opportunities for school governors and trustees to listen to parents and I am delighted that PTA UK and the National Governors' Association have been able to share, in this guidance note, some tried and tested tools to help you do this well.

PTA UK's members raise around £120 million each year (some £9,000 for each school on average). Although extremely valuable, this success in fundraising should not mask the role PTAs can play in involving parents positively in their child's learning and school improvement for the benefit of all.

With over 10,800 member associations, PTA UK is the leading Parent Teacher Association (PTA) membership organisation in England dedicated to developing and supporting PTAs and equivalent bodies. We are also proud to champion all the ways parents can participate positively in education and school life.

Why are parents important?



A school needs to understand its parents for many reasons. Parents choose schools and have an enormous influence on their child's learning. In fact Professor John Hattie's seminal 2008 study found that the "effect of parental engagement over a student's school career is equivalent to adding two or three years to that student's education".

"Parental engagement is a powerful lever for raising achievement in schools. When parents and teachers work together to improve learning, the gains in achievement are significant". - Do Parents Know They Matter Research, University of Warwick 2007

The Department for Education's Governance Handbook (2015) stated that governors should make sure systems are in place to enable all parents to put forward their views at key points in their child's education: "The board should be able to demonstrate the methods used to seek the views of parents and how those views have influenced their decision-making." The government has stated in the 2016 white paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* that: "We will also expect every academy to put in place arrangements for meaningful engagement with all parents, to listen to their views and feedback."

Governing boards of maintained schools have a statutory responsibility to communicate certain information to parents and the wider community. You can find out what information needs to be published on the school's website by visiting the guidance centre: www.nga.org.uk/guidance.

Ofsted, the schools inspectorate, is clear about the importance of giving parents a voice in schools. Its *School Inspection Handbook* (2015) stated that in outstanding schools "leaders and governors [will] have a deep, accurate understanding of the school's effectiveness informed by the views of pupils, parents and staff" in the inspection process.

Parents' views also play a part in the inspection process itself, with Ofsted's *Common Inspection Framework* (2015) stating: "Inspectors will make a judgement on the effectiveness of teaching, learning and assessment by evaluating the extent to which engagement with parents...helps them to understand how children and learners are doing in relation to the standards expected and what they need to do to improve." As soon as a school is notified of an inspection there is a statutory duty on Ofsted to inform parents and let them know how their views can be given to inspectors. Parents can give their views about a school to Ofsted even when their child's school is not being inspected.

"Parents are extremely important to Ofsted and we listen carefully to what they say to us, both during inspections and outside of this. We engage with parents regularly in many different ways to help us to do our job better – and to help us raise standards in education for everybody." - Sean Harford, National Director, Ofsted.

In May 2015 PTA UK commissioned *YouGov* to poll 1000 English parents and found that an overwhelming 85% want to have a say on how their child is educated, with 79% wishing to support their child's school. For more information about PTA UK's research, visit the Schools and Education page: www.pta.org.uk/Schools--Education.

With this in mind, an effective governing board will:

- Ensure that the school is engaging effectively with parents and consulting them on proposals;
- Use parental views to inform the school's self-evaluation and strategic planning to improve the education of pupils;
- Consider information from sources independent of the school leaders to help improve the school: parents' perceptions are a key source;
- Report back to parents the results and the changes governors and trustees make as a result of listening to parents.

As governors and trustees, you have the opportunity to help establish a culture of parental participation throughout the school or trust, among teachers and parents alike. In multi academy trusts it will need to be clear what information is needed for trustees as well as individual academies.

TIP! For each substantive business item on the agenda, consider two questions: 'What do parents think about this?' and 'What do we need to tell parents about this?' Such questions may not be relevant to all discussions but may prove to be a useful prompt.



It's about ethos: engaging and involving parents

It has long been NGA's view that engagement with parents must not be tokenistic but needs to be regular and meaningful - built into the way that the governing board operates. The views given by parents should have an impact on the work of the governing board, including at a strategic level, with the opportunity given to parents to contribute to the development of the trust or the school's vision for its future. Parents' views on the school's strengths and weaknesses and their aspirations for the future are a significant contribution.

A Framework for Governance: a flexible guide to strategic planning produced by the NGA and Wellcome Trust includes engagement with the school community: www.nga.org.uk/framework. It suggests that governing boards should know:

- How well they listen to, understand and respond to pupils, parents and staff
- How often information is reported to parents
- What benefits are drawn from such engagement.

A properly engaged governing board not only involves and listens to parents, but values their perspective. It also knows how this input has made a difference to its debates and decisions. The governing board will ensure the school has a plan to communicate and work with parents. Remember that plans will be more powerful by making them SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-bound).

Governors and trustees may want to consider:

- **What?** What are the issues, changes or opportunities that parents need to be told about or involved in?
- **How?** What means or channels exist or may be created to communicate with parents and which would be the most effective?
- **When?** What are the key dates by which this needs to be done over the school year?
- **Who?** What is the role of the governing board in communicating, as opposed to the headteacher and other members of staff?

When targeting parents the school might consider:

- Different types of individual parents and their communication needs. For example, working parents and those with special needs or disabilities.
- Parent Teacher Associations – active members and as a means of outreach to others.
- Parent Councils or Forums – active members and as a means of outreach to others.
- Engaging the wider community. This might include parents from other schools in a maintained federation or multi academy trust.
- Whether a member of the school leadership team/governing body should lead on parental engagement to ensure better communications and partnerships.
- Celebrating success: how to demonstrate and share what has been achieved.

Two years ago St Francis Catholic Primary School in Maidstone was put into special measures by Ofsted. The governing body was keen for the PTA to help rebuild the school community. Governor Richard Ashton said: "As well as providing welcome resources, the PTA is a powerful and supportive forum for parents and extended families within our school. I would like to continue to see stronger links being forged between the PTA and governing body." The parents, pupils, teachers and governors' hard work has paid off and the school has now rated as 'Good' by Ofsted. A band of volunteers led by PTA chair Kylie Milne has revitalised the association and boosted parental participation.

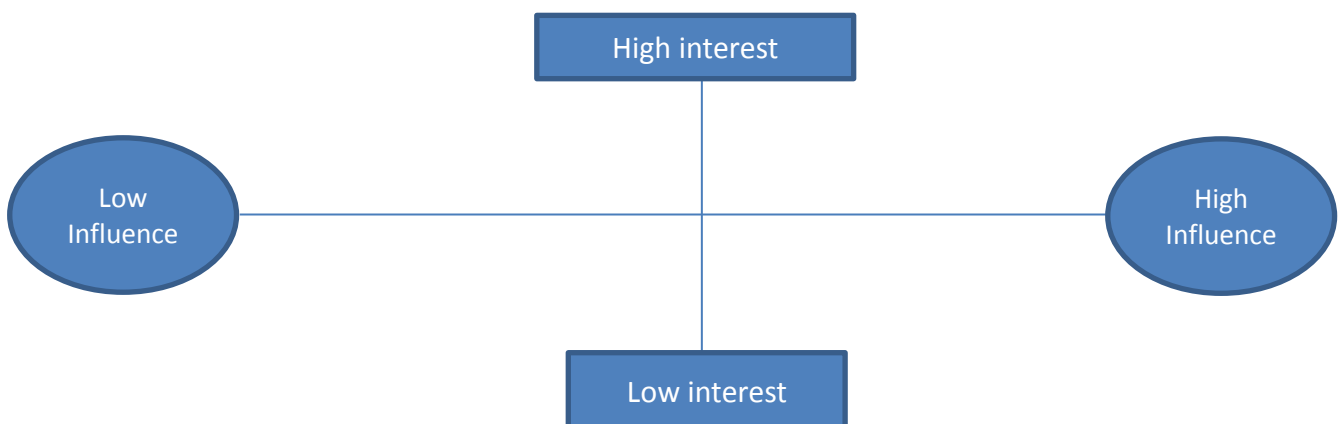
Stakeholder mapping

When we talk about parents it's easy to forget that we are talking about a diverse audience with a range of needs, interests and influences. It's crucial to ensure that you analyse this target audience to know how you will reach as many constituencies as possible and know what engagement you need from each of them in order to achieve your mission. One exercise that governors and trustees may find helpful in this is called stakeholder mapping.



You might want to use a diagram similar to the one above to explore the types of parents and family circumstances that exist or may exist at your school.

Next, try and categorise these groups using a diagram like the one below to help decide how to prioritise and target communication to each audience.



TIP! Think about whether you are communicating as effectively as possible with all parent stakeholders in order to engage them more effectively in your mission.

What do you want to know from parents?

Setting mission, ethos and vision

The governing board's role is to set the vision, ethos and strategic direction for the school and then to hold the school leadership team to account for achieving it. It is good practice to engage parents in reviewing strategic priorities and opportunities for the school's future. For example, parents' views may be sought on specific issues such as the curricula offered to pupils – what do they want their children to have learnt? – Or whether the school should join a group with other schools. But you also need to know what parents of your pupils think are the strengths and weaknesses of the school and whether or not they think their children are safe at school.



As part of NGA's 10-year anniversary campaign, we have developed a resource pack to help you engage with your community: download the [Growing Governance resource pack](#).

Measuring performance

Governing boards also hold school leaders to account for the performance of their school; they are much better equipped to do so when they know the school's strengths and weaknesses, including in respect of its relationship with parents. Governors and trustees need information to help them judge how well the school is performing against the criteria that the board and senior leaders have agreed. The views of parents are a vital part of that evidence base. Adapted from *A Framework for Governance – A Flexible guide to strategic planning*, here are some examples of performance indicators where feedback from parents could be useful:

Pupil behaviour

Pupil behaviour has a significant impact on the learning environment. Challenging behaviour disrupts teaching and learning, and consequently pupils' achievement. As well as being one of the four areas for which Ofsted makes a graded judgement, behaviour has a wider influence on both pupil and staff well-being. Pupils talk to their parents about behaviour, and their perceptions, especially concerning bullying, should be recognised and acted upon by the school with governors and trustees being regularly assured of this.

Pupil well-being and resilience

Governors and trustees have an interest in pupil well-being and survey results show us that parents prioritise the happiness and well-being of their children at school. In maintained schools the governing board has a legal duty to “promote the well-being of pupils at the school”. Research evidence shows that children with higher levels of emotional, behavioural, social, and school well-being, on average, have higher levels of academic achievement and are more engaged in school, both during school and in later years.

Communication with parents

Governors and trustees need to be assured that communication channels are effective and responsive.

Community cohesion

All state-funded schools are required in law to promote community cohesion. Developing a good relationship with the local community can benefit a school in many ways. It can open up experiences which support the curriculum and enhance pupils’ learning. Links with local businesses can also contribute to careers education. It can improve cohesion between the different ethnic and religious groups within a school. The school’s standing in the local community will also affect applications for places. Governors and trustees will want to know how the school uses its parent body to engage with the wider community.

Opportunities to succeed in extra-curricular activities

Offering pupils multiple opportunities to experience success enriches their educational experience beyond academic attainment alone and develops character. It can positively influence pupils’ well-being, health and academic achievement. It makes the school more attractive to prospective pupils and parents, and can facilitate engagement with the local community. Governors and trustees will need to be assured that the opportunities on offer meet parents’ expectations.

Consultation on specific policies or changes

On some issues the governing boards needs to consult parents by law. For example, when amending a school’s admissions criteria. If you are unsure when this applies, see NGA’s guidance centre: www.nga.org.uk/guidance for more details. There will be other times when the governing board is making a decision and the views of parents will be important, even if not legally required. For example, with a change in homework policy or a review of the qualifications being offered at secondary school.

Ways to survey parents

Regular parent surveys

What information your school currently holds about parents and what else you may need to find out will emerge from your annual planning process. Some considerations are:

1. Do we know how parents feel about the school?
2. Do we know the opinions of all groups of parents or just some?
3. Do parents know what we expect of their children?
4. Do parents understand what and how their children are learning?
5. Do parents know how they can best support their children's education?
6. How do we support parents who don't know how to support their children's learning?
7. Are there specific elements of our school improvement plan that require parental engagement to be successful?

Running a formal regular survey is one way of informing your strategy and gauging attitudes. This could be done as a written or e-survey. You may want to find out how engaged parents already feel. One approach is to ask parents to what extent they agree or disagree with a number of statements, such as:

1. I am made to feel welcome when I come into school
2. I find it easy to approach the school with questions or problems to do with my child
3. I am part of the school community
4. The school is effective at communicating; I get the information I need when I need it
5. I understand what my child is learning and how they are being taught
6. I know how to support my child's learning at home
7. The school helps me to support my child's learning
8. My relationship with the school could be improved
9. I want to get involved in school life
10. I want to have a say in how the school is run
11. The school asks me for my opinion
12. I have attended a PTA activity or event

Getting a high response rate to surveys from parents is not always easy. As well as working with your PTA to encourage parents to have a say, many schools promote surveys with letters home, the school website, parent email and social media.

There are also commercial companies that conduct surveys; although there is a cost attached, it does save staff time and has the advantage of providing comparative data.

Ofsted and Parent View

Parent View is an aspect of Ofsted's website that replaced the previous paper-based parent questionnaires and allows parents to share their views about their child's school. Inspectors start to monitor Parent View for responses as soon as notice of inspection is given to a school. These are

considered alongside other data/information and can be used to open a line of inquiry as part of the inspection process and are reflected in the inspection judgement.

Whilst Parent View responses mainly happen as part of the inspection process, parents can use this at any point to give feedback on their child's school and Ofsted can use responses to inform their ongoing risk assessment of a school's effectiveness outside of the usual inspection cycle. You could consider whether Parent View might be a good tool for you to gather and monitor the views of your parents annually.

Ofsted highlights that Parent View is rarely used as a complaints mechanism, misuse is rare and dealt with quickly and the majority of responses are positive. Ofsted can issue guest accounts, which are an easy way for parents to access the system. Some schools provide laptops at school events and encourage parents to input their views while there.

St Bede's secondary school, Redhill, Surrey

At St Bede's secondary school governors supported parental engagement by commissioning a survey of pupils' parents, which acted as a baseline and followed on a year later with another survey to measure the impact of their initiatives over the course of the year. The first survey led to the development of a weekly newsletter to parents and more interaction by parents with the school's website. With the backing of governors, parents were invited to tour the school with student guides; there were more parental evenings and mornings with information targeted at different types of parent.

One year on, the second survey was commissioned and the results showed that parents were much happier about the school. Their two main issues had been addressed: communication to parents had improved and visibility of the headteacher around school had been addressed. The second survey revealed a desire for better buildings for pupils; an issue the governors are considering.

"It's so much better to be actively listening to parents and other stakeholders. In inviting parents to the school, they can now appreciate our constraints and we theirs." Victoria Clifford, chair of governors

Ways to engage parents collectively

Events

From coffee mornings to parents' evenings, events are a good opportunity to explain the work of the school to parents, quash rumours, gauge reactions and invite responses. We hear reports from schools that have tried to do this and had very little uptake. But then we've also heard great success stories. One school wrapped a parent consultation around an event based on world foods, where families were asked to bring in a home-made dish. At the very popular event parents were then asked for their views on a range of important issues.

Parent Councils

Some schools have a parent council (or forum), which enables parents to meet, share ideas, hear news and feedback to the school. Parent Councils provide a valuable regular forum for parents to have a voice within the school and support the school in understanding and making links with the wider parent community. They can also provide a direct conduit for the governing board to consult parents.

A parent council may have representatives from each class or year group, or can be a forum open to any parents who wish to attend. While some schools are legally required to set up a Parent Council (namely Trust schools where a majority of governors are appointed by the Trust), for most it remains up to the governing board of the school to decide if it wants one, how to support and engage with it.

Parent focus groups

A focus group is a 'focussed' discussion on a particular issue where parents are free to give their personal opinion in an informal group setting. Focus groups can provide more detailed information than can be obtained from a survey and can explore views so that the governing board understands parents' perceptions and wishes, rather than making assumptions. It can provide assurance that governors have correctly interpreted how parents stand on certain matters and to understand why they hold these views. There is likely to be a range of views and experiences on any topic.

Such a focussed group discussion needs to be led by someone who is clear about its objectives and parameters and has the right skills and experience. That person could well be a governor or trustee.

The key to a successful focus group is planning. Parents must know the issue to be discussed when they are invited. The school needs to consider whether it may be best to have more than one group to allow different parents the opportunity to contribute. It can be useful to set out guidelines for participating at the beginning of the session as many parents will be unfamiliar with focus groups. It may also be a means of engaging parents who do not usually come to school events, or parents who have a track record of not supporting school policy. For example, policies on attendance, behaviour, uniform and homework.

Personally inviting parents into school for a structured discussion and listening to them may help to establish a better relationship with them and secure their support for the school's policies. Focus groups are not a forum for dealing with individual issues and complaints, so the leader needs to know the processes for dealing with individual matters if they crop up. For example, a discussion about transport provision into school may lead to revelations about bullying.

Parent and Teacher Associations (PTAs)

A PTA is a group that aims to advance the education of pupils in a school by developing effective relationships between school leaders, teachers, parents and the local community. Typically the PTA is known for fundraising activity but it can also be an effective and efficient way to consult parents. 75% of all UK schools have some form of Parent and Teacher Association, parent body or friends' group (with 50% of all PTAs being members of PTA UK). PTAs could support schools to engage with parents with:

- PTA events – which provide opportunities for parents to interact both with each other and the school. PTA UK members typically provide an average of 13 events per year, extending the school's reach beyond pupils and teachers to embrace parents, elected representatives, other charities and local businesses.

- Promoting opportunities for feedback. For example, questionnaires, social media or face-to-face.
- Linking PTA fundraising or other activities to school priorities.
- Providing opportunities to bring the otherwise difficult to reach parents into school and feel part of the school community.
- Building relationships between teachers, governors, parents and pupils through joint enterprises.

It is worth considering:

- Has it been clearly agreed what role the PTA will play in consulting parents and via what methods (as a one-off or as a longer-term arrangement)?
- Are meetings planned to review how working together has gone and what the next steps should be?

Although many PTAs are initiated by parents, in many instances schools have taken a lead, especially when faced with particular challenges. PTA UK can support any governors or trustees who wish, alongside the headteacher, to support a PTA being established in their school or improve the effectiveness of an existing body.

“Although traditionally known for their fundraising efforts, PTAs actually serve a far greater purpose. Many people don’t realise the important part PTAs play in developing stronger home -school links and in particular relationships with harder to reach parents.” - David Barnett, Headteacher at Chudleigh Church of England primary school, Devon. David has been able to consult via the PTA and get feedback from parents on a new behaviour reward system, which has not only generated fresh ideas but has also strengthened the crucial relationship between teachers and parents.

Social media

The school should take a position on whether or not it will engage with parents through social media. For example, the school might have an ‘official’ Facebook and/or Twitter account for news but could also use them to raise awareness about consultations and options for parental engagement. However, if the school is considering using such platforms to glean views, they need to be aware of the risk of criticism, and how to encourage parents to use the formal channels.

Parents themselves may set up social media discussion groups and again the school will want to consider how it should relate to it.

Acting on the results and reporting

Parents will want to know what happened as a result of their engagement. In short – is the school listening to us? Was it worth the effort? Parental voice works best when governors and trustees listen, discuss the results, act and report to the parent body. This leads to a partnership of action and better school and positive relationships, even if the initial exercise had been a lightning rod for disaffection.

It's important for the school to demonstrate that it is listening and to provide feedback about the decisions that have been taken and any actions that will follow. For each specific exercise, the governing board should consider how the school will report the results. For example, using the school newsletter, website, parent email, text message or social media account/s to provide updates on any issues the school is engaging parents on.

In addition, governing boards should consider producing an annual report for parents, including on strategic developments and demonstrating how the governing board governors or trustees acted on parental views to improve the school: 'you said/we did'. Careful timely communication is likely to lead to more support for changes and reduce the number of complaints.

TIP! Don't be afraid of failure. Involving and engaging with stakeholders is something you learn by doing. Build on your efforts and test out a range of approaches.

Upland Primary School

At Upland primary school a working party of governors was set up to investigate the various models that other schools were using to engage with parents. The working party consulted the school's senior leadership team (SLT) on what they envisioned to be a meaningful parent group. Then the governors held a coffee morning for parents to get involved in their plans. Terms of reference were drawn up and expectations defined. The aims of the resulting parent forum are to:

- Improve communication between school, parents and the governing board (GB)
- Promote involvement of parents in school and assist parents to support their children
- Enable parents to come together to discuss and share their ideas
- Give parents a voice to put their views forward to school leaders and the governing board, enabling them to make a difference.

Each school class has an elected representative tasked with gathering the views and opinions of parents of pupils in that class, which they feedback at regular Parent Partnership meetings. The forum chair organises two meetings per term. The partnership is able to invite members of staff to their meetings to present, and the SLT and GB have an opportunity to add items to the agenda. A governor is present at every meeting to support and advise the reps and ensure that all discussions are focussed.

Letters are sent to every parent/carer requesting their thoughts on the upcoming topics, which are also available on the school website and parent mail. Parents can feed-in through their class rep in person or by email. Minutes are published on the school website and successful outcomes highlighted.

The Upland Parent Partnership is recognised as a consultative and advisory body to the governors, and the governing board is updated with a progress report at each full meeting. It gives governors a

better understanding of how parents feel, and governors use the information obtained to assist in formulating the strategic direction of the school. Gaining an understanding of their child's education enables parents to be more involved and ultimately benefits their children.

The school's motto is 'Working Together, Learning Together, Achieving Together' and this has been put into practice by the setting up of the partnership. The parents are making a positive contribution and have a channel for their voice to be heard. The partnership has just completed its first year and the members are beginning to take ownership. They have published a code of conduct written by parents for parents, which outlines how they expect visitors on the school premises to behave.

They will also soon be carrying out a survey of parents' skills and requesting for volunteers to come forward to assist the school in various roles.

Malcolm Mackenzie, Vice Chair at Upland Primary School, which won a special commendation in NGA's Outstanding Governance Awards 2015.

How to feedback: please email mark.gardner@nga.org.uk with your comments on this briefing note and if you have some experiences to share from your school.

Training and consultancy: Our consultancy and training is open to all governing boards in England. We offer tailored quality-assured consultancy and a range of key training sessions delivered by consultants with proven governance knowledge and expertise. If you would like to discuss support for developing a parent engagement strategy, please contact: training@nga.org.uk.