

Parents as Partners

Information for Parent Council members



Thank you for your interest in your school's Parent Council. Parent Councils provide an opportunity to become involved in your child's school community. Your contribution to the life of the school will be much appreciated.

This leaflet is for new Parent Council members, to help them understand their role and signpost them to sources of information and support. It may also be useful to others.

Message from the Minister for Children and Young People

"I firmly believe that if we are to improve the outcomes for Scottish children and young people and achieve the aims of Curriculum for Excellence, we must work in partnership with parents. Parent Councils have a key role to play in helping schools and parents understand one another, and in developing that partnership."

Angela Constance

Message from the Chair of the National Parent Forum of Scotland

"Parents want the best for their children. Parent Councils are a chance for parents to get involved and do what they can to help their school be the best it can be. It can be hard work and time consuming, but it's worth it. Our children deserve no less and we know that everyone can benefit when we get the partnership between schools and parents working well."

Iain Ellis

Additional copies are available upon request from Education Scotland. The leaflet can also be downloaded from Parentzone in PDF or print friendly Word format.

The Basics

Getting your Parent Council started and keeping it running

Detailed information on establishing and running a Parent Council (including a sample constitution) is set out in the **Parents as partners in their children's learning – Toolkit**. Most Parent Councils and schools will have a copy of the Toolkit which can also be found on the Parentzone website: www.ltscotland.org.uk/parentzone.

There is considerable flexibility in how the Parent Forum chooses to organise their Parent Council but here are some important areas you may want to consider:

a) Office Bearers – section 8 of the Toolkit gives more detail on membership and roles

The Parent Council may choose to have office bearers to help to organise how it works and to carry out some of the tasks that need to be done. Typically office bearers include:

- **Chairperson**, who should always be a member of the Parent Forum
- **Secretary/Clerk** to take minutes and handle communications
- **Treasurer** to handle and account for any moneys

The majority of Parent Council members should be drawn from the Parent Forum, i.e. parents of children at the school, but others (teachers, pupils, community representatives, etc) can also be permanent members **or** co-opted to assist with a particular task. It is up to the Parent Council to work out the structure that is best for them.

b) Sub groups

Sometimes it may be useful to organise a short term or longer term sub-group to carry out a specific task. A sub-group may also provide an opportunity to involve parents who are unable to commit to being full members of the Parent Council. If a sub-group is set up it is important to ensure it has a clear remit – with someone responsible for its organisation and for reporting back to the full Parent Council.

Setting Ground Rules and Working Together

Meetings will be most effective if everyone understands what is expected and agrees to work together.

In considering ground rules you might want to:

- Set meeting dates well in advance and allocate a specific amount of time to them. Encourage the Headteacher to share the school session diary with the Parent Council and all parents at the start of the session
- Agree the agenda in advance and stick to it. Include an opportunity for members to raise Any Other Competent Business (AOCB)
- Identify 'standing items' for every meeting – e.g. approving previous minutes
- Record action points clearly in the minutes and make a note of who has agreed to undertake the action. Check progress on action points agreed at previous meetings
- Everyone's contribution is important – support the group and work as a team
- Respect each other's point of view – even if you think they are wrong!
- Encourage quieter members to take part. Ensure everyone can participate fairly
- Aim towards constructive discussion and decisions – try not to let it 'get personal'

- Consider how you want to handle parents who turn up at meetings but are not members – e.g. should they be able to raise issues and comment or just observe?
- At times there will be disagreements. Try and resolve these in the interests of the school and the pupils but seek help if you need it, either from the Headteacher or the Local Authority. At times, you may need to get a wider parent view if there is an issue that is dividing opinion.

Local Authorities will often run courses on managing meetings.

Communication – section 2 of the Toolkit gives more detail on involving parents

Communicating with the Parent Forum and with the whole school community is a key area of the Parent Council's work. It is crucial that the Parent Council can effectively represent parental views and also keep them informed and involved in what it is doing.

It is for the Parent Council, in consultation with parents, to consider what range of communication methods will work best.

Methods of communication might include:

- Face to Face – at school events such as school fair or concert; drop-in event; coffee mornings; curriculum evenings or a focus group discussion
- Hard Copy – Parent Council or school newsletters; posters on a noticeboard; flyers; letters; questionnaires or surveys; or through the local press
- Making best use of technology: email; a website; blog or social network; Glow; text messaging.

Parent Councils should also think about how to contact parents of children who are about to join the school, or how best to communicate with parents who do not have English as a first language or who have difficulty with the usual communication methods.

Local media can be used to help share information from the Parent Council about events or activities. You can get advice from your local authority Parental Involvement Officer if you are unsure of how to deal with media enquiries.

School Improvement

The Parent Council has a key role to play in getting the best education for all the pupils of the school. It should work closely with the Headteacher on the development/improvement plan, and can help in considering how best to inform and involve parents on these issues.

The Parent Council has a specific role to play in supporting the school in inspections (see back page).

Agreeing priorities

It is important to ensure that each year the whole Parent Forum has the opportunity to help shape the Parent Council's priorities. This can be done by carrying out a simple survey or at a parent event in the school. It is also important to consider the views of pupils, perhaps through consultation with the Pupil Council.

Working with others

The Headteacher's Role

The Headteacher should provide advice, guidance and support for the Parent Council. He/she has *a right and a duty* to attend Parent Council meetings and should provide information on issues affecting the school, and is a link with other school staff and the local authority.

The Headteacher should provide regular updates to the Parent Council on developments in the school, and also an annual update to the Parent Forum. Some Parent Councils find it helpful for the Headteacher to have an allocated time slot at the beginning or the end of the meeting.

It is good practice to ask the Headteacher in advance if he/she has any issues that should be on the agenda, but it is for the Parent Council to develop/agree the agenda.

Getting more parents on board

Not all parents in the school will feel comfortable or be able to formally join the Parent Council, or to attend meetings, but some may be willing to help out on a more ad-hoc basis. Some may never consider volunteering themselves, but if personally approached by a Parent Council member whom they know, would be very willing to help out on a specific task or for a short time.

The Parent Council may find it useful to keep a list of parents' contact details or a register of interests and skills that can be drawn upon when necessary. It is important to note that any personal information kept by the Parent Council must be kept safe and used only for the purpose for which it was given. More information on data protection can be found at: www.ico.gov.uk.

Family and the wider community

Families (grandparents and other relatives) and members of the wider community can be a great source of expertise with a wealth of experience and knowledge (and, if retired, often have more time to help than parents) that the Parent Council and school can tap into.

Local businesses and shops may be interested in supporting the Parent Council – by donating raffle prizes or sponsoring activities. Parents may have contacts in the workplace that can help children's learning – by providing work experience, arranging visits or by linking their expertise directly into collaboration with teachers.

Local faith groups are often in touch with parents and may be able to support the Parent Council by involving a wider group of people. The local Community Council or other community/charitable/voluntary groups in your area may also be a valuable source of information and advice. Your Headteacher will be able to advise you on any specific requirements or procedures you may need to follow.

Pupil Involvement

Don't forget the pupils! They are, after all, on the 'front line of learning' and the main aim of the Parent Council is to ensure that their school and learning is the best it can be.

Getting pupils' views, ideas and opinions about their learning experiences can be really enlightening. Pupils can be very helpful in developing priorities and activities. In Secondary

it may be appropriate to have input from pupil representatives at each meeting. At Primary it may be that a member of the Parent Council can meet with the Pupil Council at suitable times throughout the year.

Pupils can also help at events and are useful as a channel of communication to parents.

Other Parent Councils

Meeting or sharing information with other Parent Councils in your area can be helpful. Pooling resources and expertise on local issues or challenges such as the need for better road safety or improving the quality of school meals can produce excellent results. You may also have a shared interest in local events or work with the same community members.

Your Local Authority

Each Local Authority has a member of staff who holds responsibility for parental involvement. And Local Authorities must provide support to help Parent Councils carry out their functions. This may include: support with administration; training – particularly in relation to involvement in recruiting senior staff; and reasonable financial support.

All local authorities should consult Parent Councils on their strategy to promote parental involvement. They will also have mechanisms in place to consult Parent Councils on other issues such as school closures, school holidays, changes to catchment areas, etc.

Most Local Authorities facilitate ways in which Parent Councils can share experiences, ideas and issues. These can include regular meetings for Chairs with the Local Authority Parental Involvement Officer, an Annual Conference, meetings with the Director, an online facility such as Glow, Gateway or a blog, or a website where key information can be found. It is worth finding out what happens in your area as this can be a good source of sharing and support for your Parent Council.

The National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFS)

The NPFS was set up in 2009 following research findings that Parent Councils felt that they wanted a new national organisation to represent their views. The NPFS is drawn from Parent Councils in each local authority area across Scotland and contributes to national working groups in a number of key policy areas. The NPFS works in partnership with the Scottish Government and Local Authorities to ensure that parents' views are heard and considered.

The NPFS communicates with Parent Councils through its network of local representatives. In some areas this may be an email update, in others at local area forum meetings and events. The NPFS also issues a Quarterly Parent Council Newsletter and provides updates to Parent Councils as necessary. In addition, it runs an annual conference for parents and Parent Councils ensuring that it provides up to date information on the key issues affecting children's education.

You can find out how to contact your local area representative on the NPFS website: www.parentforumscotland.org.

Practical Issues

Confidentiality

What should the Parent Council do if a parent approaches you with a 'my child has...' enquiry? This could be anything from minor homework problems through to a serious issue such as bullying or the performance of a teacher.

It may be possible to draw a general issue for consideration by the Parent Council from a specific concern without making reference to the specific concern (e.g. what is the school's homework policy? What is the school's Bullying Policy?). However, issues about individual pupils, families or teachers **should not** be discussed and parents should be referred on to the Headteacher. The Parent Council may find it useful to establish a range of local authority or school contacts to whom they can refer parents for expert assistance and support.

Legal Issues

• Child Protection

It is not a requirement that all members of Parent Councils be CRBS/Protection of Vulnerable Groups (PVG) checked before joining the Parent Council. However, there may be occasions where a check is necessary or desirable. Details of the criteria and arrangements for Disclosure can be found online: www.crbs.org.uk/PVG. The Headteacher or Local Authority should also be well placed to provide advice if there is any uncertainty. Most Authorities will run Child Protection training for members of Parent Councils.

• Insurance

There will be some circumstances where Parent Council activities must be covered by Public Liability Insurance, e.g. social events and school fairs if being organised by the Parent Council. It is important that Parent Councils take the advice of their Headteacher or Local Authority who can advise them of insurance arrangements in their area. Useful advice and information on insurance can be found on the Scottish Parent Teacher Council (SPTC) website: www.sptc.info.

• Finance

Most Local Authorities provide a small budget for Parent Councils to cover administrative and running costs. During the course of the year the Parent Council may also raise funds and have its own expenditure. This money must be accounted for and the Parent Council must make an annual report to the Parent Forum on income and expenditure. It is up to the Parent Council, taking advice from the Headteacher and the Local Authority, to consider how to best keep its accounts. Proper records and controls are important.

Accounts don't need to be formally audited but must be presented for approval at the Parent Council Annual General Meeting. It is however good practice to have your accounts independently assessed. This can be done by a suitably qualified parent or a community volunteer who is not on the Parent Council. Some Local Authorities may require accounts to be submitted to them.

Other important areas to consider

Curriculum for Excellence

Curriculum for Excellence (often shortened to 'CfE') is the term used for the curriculum in Scotland. It covers everything that happens around children's learning. Not just what children are taught but also how they learn, how teachers teach, qualifications, who else supports the learning, how they develop the skills to best prepare them for their future. It applies to all children and young people aged 3-18, wherever they are learning.

A variety of sources with information for parents about CfE is available: online and in hard copy, through a series of Factfiles and other leaflets, videos of CfE in action and Q&A material. Information can be accessed through schools and Local Authorities, but is also sent to Parent Councils directly. There is a 'Curriculum for Excellence' tab on the Parentzone homepage: www.ltscotland.org.uk/parentzone.

Parents are vital partners in Curriculum for Excellence. Parent Councils have a key role to play in helping parents get the right information they need to support their child's learning and choices. They can also help schools by ensuring that parents views are heard and understood in all aspects of implementation of Curriculum for Excellence. Some key areas for Parent Councils to consider are:

- Assessment, reporting and profiling arrangements for pupils
- Opportunities for personalisation and choice, and support
- The entitlement for all children to a broad general education
- Plans for skills development including Literacy and Numeracy
- Health and wellbeing across learning
- Transition arrangements
- Senior Phase and options available for further education, employment or training

Headteachers will be best placed to advise the Parent Council on any of these aspects of Curriculum for Excellence, and more examples from other schools and further information can be found at: www.scotland.gov.uk/cfeinaction. The skills, experience and contacts of parents can be a valuable resource to schools in helping them deliver Curriculum for Excellence. The Parent Council will wish to consider in which ways it can best offer support and help.

Additional Support Needs

Every child is entitled to support to overcome barriers that may get in the way of their learning. This entitlement is set in legislation – and is enshrined in Curriculum for Excellence.

Schools and Local Authorities must have arrangements in place to ensure that the needs of all pupils are met and parents are given their rights under the legislation. Details of The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, as amended, often referred to as 'the ASL Act', can be found on the Scottish Government website: www.scotland.gov.uk/ASL.

Specific cases are outwith the Parent Council's remit but the general arrangements for sharing information, involving and supporting parents should be considered – to ensure that the needs of parents of children with additional support needs are taken into account when priorities are developed.

Other important areas to consider

The role of the Parent Council in School inspections

A new inspection framework for inspecting schools was introduced in August 2011. The important role that the Parent Council plays in supporting improvement in the school is recognised in the framework. During an inspection, the lay member of the inspection team will meet with the Chair of the Parent Council as the representative of the school parent community and discuss all aspects of parental involvement in the school. At the end of the inspection the Headteacher, chair of the Parent Council and the Director of Education will receive a confidential copy of the Record of Inspection Findings (RIF). The Chair of the Parent Council should use the RIF as a basis for discussing with the Headteacher any actions arising from the inspection, and how the main messages from the inspection can be shared with the Parent Council and more widely with parents. They should also agree how the Parent Council and parents can continue to support any improvement in the school.

Detailed guidance for Parent Council Chairs on inspections can be found on the Education Scotland website: www.hmie.gov.uk/AboutUs/InspectionResources/.

Useful web-links

www.educationscotland.gov.uk – **Education Scotland** is the national body responsible for supporting quality and improvement in learning and teaching.

www.engageforeducation.org – **Engage for Education** is a platform for Scotland's education community (which very much includes parents) to engage directly with the Scottish Government.

www.enquire.org.uk – **Enquire** is the Scottish advice service for additional support for learning. It publishes a guide for parents on additional support for learning and a series of factsheets.

www.parentforumscotland.org – **The National Parent Forum for Scotland** (NPFS) is the representative body for Parent Councils in Scotland, working with key partners such as Education Scotland, Local Authorities, the Scottish Government.

www.ltscotland.org.uk/parentzone – **Parentzone** is a dedicated site containing information on education in Scotland tailored to the needs of parents.

www.scotland.gov.uk/Parents – The **Scottish Government** website provides information on a range of educational issues of interest to parents.

www.sptc.info – The **Scottish Parent Teacher Council** is a national organisation for parents' groups in Scottish schools offering help and advice to parents and providing a range of leaflets, reports and resources.