Why are the views of parents so important?
A school needs to understand its parents and their views of the education being provided to their children because parents choose schools and they have an enormous influence on their children’s learning.

This briefing does not cover the issue of engaging with parents in order to involve them more effectively in supporting their child’s learning or their parenting. Nor is it a document concerned with dealing with parental complaints, although the information gleaned from a complaint might also alert Governing Bodies to issues which need consideration.

This note aims to give Governing Bodies an understanding of their role in seeking the views of parents.

OfSTED and the introduction of Parent View
OfSTED has recently introduced Parent View – a website that encourages parents to contribute their views on schools’ performance. The questionnaire includes 12 questions covering issues important to the parents and schools alike.

Some schools have voiced their concern that a small number of disaffected parents could skew the overall feedback about their school. At a recent NGA seminar, OfSTED confirmed that only three contributions were needed to allow the views to be seen, but assured delegates that far more than that number would be needed to trigger an inspection.

It’s natural that as parents become better informed about their child’s education, we can expect them to challenge schools more about standards and goals. That should encourage school leaders to actively seek their input.

OfSTED laid out its thinking on the matter in an earlier Annual Report: “Most commonly, the Governing Body knew too little about the school because monitoring was not rigorous or because over-generous self review judgements were accepted without sufficient challenge,” it wrote. “At times of great change and in an inherently challenging sector, they accepted too much on trust.”

Five key questions governors need to consider:
This briefing paper will cover some of the key ways we should be engaging with parents, although it will concentrate on arguably the most effective way of canvassing parental opinion: the parental survey.

The questions we will cover are:
1. How can we engage with parents?
2. How do we conduct a survey for parents?
3. What are useful questions to ask parents
4. What do our results tell us?
5. How do we report and act on the results?

Question 1: How can we engage with parents?

There are many ways to engage with parents:-

- Encourage Headteachers, members of the Senior Leadership Team and/or classroom staff (more in primaries) to welcome pupils into school or be at the school gate at the end of the day
- Invite parents into school to talk about key school initiatives within a class or Key Stage as well as provide guidance on what parents should do to support their children’s learning
- Circulate regular newsletters
- Utilise the school website, ParentMail or even a Twitter feed to provide regular school updates and encourage dialogue
• Include information about the Governing Body in a dedicated section of the school website, provide governors with recognisable ‘governor badges’ and organise a photo wall in the school reception that includes head and shoulders photographs of members of staff and also key members of the Governing Body

• Think about having some kind of open door policy, when the Headteacher or members of the Senior Leadership Team offer set times for parents to meet with them.

**Question 2: How do we conduct a survey for parents?**

Gauging parental opinion is not a straightforward task. It may well be that parents with a child that has excelled or those with an axe to grind are only too happy to complete and return a questionnaire. But these views may not be representative and it’s imperative that school leaders devise strategies to poll opinion from the silent majority of parents to ensure their self-evaluation is properly robust.

One of the best ways to improve response rates is through an active marketing campaign before the questionnaire is sent out. Use newsletters, ParentMail and the like to inform parents about the questionnaire, and explain why their views matter. It also helps to get the pupils involved – their cajoling can help drive response rates up. Meanwhile, form tutors can keep an eye on which parents have returned questionnaires, so can help pass on reminders, if needed.

When sending reminders, keep a positive spin on the message. Sending a reminder that says you have only received 10 responses will not motivate other parents into action. Rather, a message such as “For those that have not yet had chance to give us their feedback ...” tends to produce a much better outcome.

These days, there’s a temptation to think that technology can make our lives easier. But when it comes to parental surveys, we would urge school leaders not to be seduced by apparent ease of online questionnaires. From our experience, it seems that using online surveys is the most sure-fire way of actually reducing response rates – typically by a factor of 10. It’s just too easy for parents to ignore something that lands in an inbox.

Timing is also important. Holidays are kryptonite for questionnaires – so pick your times carefully and ensure you have two full weeks that will not be interrupted by holidays, inset days or school plays.

Having a motivated child as the conduit between parents and schools makes the single biggest difference to a school’s response rates. While response rates vary from school to school and area to area, you should ideal.

**Question 3: What are useful questions to ask parents?**

One of the hallmarks of a successful self-evaluation process is having a clearly defined goal at the outset. Those schools that understand what they want to measure in order to improve teaching and learning have an immediate head start. Often, school leaders struggle with the questions that they want to ask parents. However, one good trick is to use surveys to poll opinion on changes that the school has already implemented.

This is a powerful way to demonstrate the quality of the self-evaluation process as it provides a feedback mechanism, enabling school leaders to appraise the success of initiatives and make adjustments to their strategies accordingly. It can also help demonstrate that the Governing Body has understood what issues within the school need addressing.

To give parental responses a degree of context, it is best practice to ask two types of questions: ones that assess how satisfied parents are with particular aspects of the schools; and ones that assess how important these are to parents.
Without asking both types of question, there’s a risk that school leaders will be misled by parents’ satisfaction with aspects of the school that they regard as unimportant – or fail to identify dissatisfaction with important issues.

It’s also important to give parents more than a straight scorecard. While this approach makes the task of analysing the results more straightforward, you miss out on the opportunity to put context to some of the results. Qualitative information, such as “any further comments or suggestions”, might take more time to analyse, but it provides an invaluable opportunity to identify potential issues that may otherwise go undetected. An example of this was a comment, “I am no longer able to help my child in Year 4 with his maths homework – can someone please help me.”

Top 5 questions to ask

From experience, these are the top five areas schools explore in their surveys. The top four are common to both Primary and Secondary Schools, however there is one main difference in 5th place. ‘Extra curricular activities’ which is asked of Secondary parents is replaced by ‘quality of management’ for Primary parents.

1. Ensuring pupils do their best and make good progress
2. Encouraging and listening to parent views
3. Treating all pupils fairly and equally
4. Explaining to parents how to help their child
5. Quality of school management (Primary) / Extra curricular activities (Secondary)

These five areas should be included in any parental questionnaire. However, it is best practice to also choose some additional questions which are pertinent to your own school’s particular circumstances.

**Question 4: What do our results tell us?**

Working with school leaders over the past 12 years, we have identified 20 key parental priorities for parents of primary and secondary school children, 17 of which are common to both. These range from teaching quality and exam results to happiness of child and levels of homework.

The following tables highlight the top 5 most important areas of schooling for parents, listed according to the responses by Primary and Secondary parents and in order of priority.

Some interesting points to note are:

- Surprisingly, exam results do not appear in the top 5 and rarely in the top 10 for most schools.
- The top 5 priorities are identical for Primary and Secondary parents.
- ‘Caring teachers’ is more important to girls’ parents, whereas ‘developing potential’ is more important to boys’ parents.
- In terms of satisfaction with each of the different areas, parents are most satisfied with ‘happiness of child’.

Even those establishments that have a clear understanding of what to ask parents can face a challenge in interpreting the data they get back. Entering and analysing the data can be a laborious and time-consuming task, especially as those charged with interpreting the data may have little more to rely on than a simple spreadsheet. Some schools employ third parties to do this for them.

When analysing the data, it’s essential to take into account statistical reliability. Without it, an average score of three on a scale of one to five could mean everyone is neutral towards that question, or it could mean that parents are polarised between the highly satisfied or extremely dissatisfied.
You will also want to be able to drill down into the data, analysing results by gender or year group. As children progress through their school, parents’ concerns can change – typically, where parents have children who are taking exams, there’s a tendency to place greater importance on academic issues. If you can benchmark your results against those of a large number of schools operating in similar circumstances, it’s far easier to spot the unusual results.

To take another example, looking at parental views on academic subjects, it may be tempting to celebrate the achievements of your history teachers, while having a quiet word with the head of religious studies. As it happens, history invariably scores well at the vast majority of schools, while religious studies nearly always rates poorly – apart from at Catholic schools, where it can outshine history. Knowing these patterns and removing parental bias can again provide context for results.

**Question 5: How do we report and act on the results of consultation?**

It is important to consider how things have changed from the previous year. The results of parental surveys should necessarily play some part in the school improvement plan – if there are any obvious areas of concern, these naturally suggest where action needs to be taken.

You should always provide parents with feedback on the survey results and the actions you intend to take as a result. Failure to do so will mean response rates will drop off with the next survey and as you will want to annually re-evaluate, you don’t want this to happen.

You can report the findings in many ways. A letter to all parents ensures that the feedback should reach everyone, and you can also include the findings on the school website and in your next school newsletter. It’s always worth highlighting both some of the positive findings and also some of the areas where parents have suggested you need to address – and how you will be doing so.

There may also be issues which you want to investigate further. The Governing Body could decide to undertake a focus group with parents on a specific subject which is causing concern or was the surprise.

In one school we worked with recently, their survey highlighted concerns around communication between the school and its parents. It was frustrating for the head as she had tried several times to get parents in to discuss certain subjects including this topic and no-one ever turned up. When she fed the results back to her parents, highlighting this was the area they had raised as their number one priority for improvement and specifically asked for parents who had rated this area negatively to come in and tell her how she could improve it, the response was overwhelming.

The leaders at your school should be prepared to discuss the results – whether it has been a lightening rod for parental disaffection or reason for celebration.