



Centre for Successful Schools
and
CREATE Consultants

Parent Governor Representatives

Executive Summary

September 2004

Parent Governor Representatives – a ‘bigger say’ for parents?

Executive Summary

Introduction

The School Standards and Framework Act of 1998 required local authorities to have between two and five representatives of parents on their education committees by June 2000. These representatives, known as Parent Governor Representatives (PGRs), were to be drawn from among local parent governors and elected by parent governors. By regulation they have full voting rights on all local authority functions related to education

In the Foreword to a guide for PGRs, David Blunkett, the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, commented:

‘As part of our drive to raise standards, the Government wants parents to have a bigger say in local authority decisions which affect the range and quality of education in schools’.

The first parent governor representatives were elected and took up post in 2000. Their term of office was set by statute as between two and four years and was left to the individual local authority to determine.

At the time that this study was commissioned by the Research and Information on State Education (RISE), PGRs had been in existence for approximately two years. The research aim was to explore the role of parent governor representatives in the light of the Government’s intention that they should serve as a voice for parents. It proposed to examine the extent to which the introduction of PGRs had led to greater parental input and participation in making education policy at different levels. The study aimed to answer the question:

To what extent does the existence of a structure for participation in policy making mean that participation actually occurs, and additionally, that it has some effect?

Methodology

The study incorporates the following elements.

(i) *Background information*

(ii) *Surveys*

A **survey** of 150 local authorities in England via a questionnaire directed to all known parent governor representatives, former parent governor representatives, representative education officers and elected members.

The first phase of data collection took place in June and July 2003. In excess of 400 questionnaires were sent out to current and former PGRs. 118 completed questionnaires

were returned, a response rate of almost 30%. 86 different local authorities were represented in the returns.

In the second phase of data collection, questionnaires to explore the views of Chief Education Officers (CEOs)/Directors of Education and elected members of local councils with a particular brief for Education were sent out in November and December 2003. 46 responses were received from CEOs/Directors of Education, or their nominated representatives, and from 47 elected members. 80 different local authorities were represented in the returned questionnaires from all parts of the country.

Taking into consideration responses to all three questionnaires, 111 local authorities in all were represented in the survey.

The statistical data was analysed by computer at Keele University, using an appropriate Excel software package.

(iii) Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with a 27-strong sample of parent governor representatives, former parent governor representatives, representative education officers and elected members in six local authorities.

Research outcomes

The findings reported here are based on the statistical data from the surveys and the open-ended comments which many of the respondents provided, together with the interview data.

The Parent Governor Representatives' Experience

Background details of PGRs and their work contexts

The 73 current and 45 former parent governor representatives who responded to the questionnaire constitute a fairly balanced mix of males and females (54% male, 46% female). The majority were parent governors in either the primary phase (45%) or the secondary phase (39%) of maintained schools. Only 17% of respondents had had previous experience in local government prior to becoming a PGR. The PGRs most often reported serving on the Schools Forum (42% overall) and the Scrutiny and Overview Committee (41% overall).

The reception accorded to PGRs

The majority of PGRs broadly perceived themselves to have been made welcome and valued by officers of the LEA, elected members of the local council, local headteachers and their fellow PGRs. Even where this was not the case, PGRs considered they had been received more often with indifference rather than actual hostility.

Representing parents

PGRs were introduced into local government to represent parents. More than 80% of the CEOs and elected members responding to the questionnaire said that it was appropriate that parents should be represented as a discrete group on committees and working parties of the local authority. In addition, more than half of the CEOs and elected members agreed that including PGRs on local council committees and working parties was an effective way to represent the views of parents.

In spite of this however, less than a quarter of CEOs and less than half the elected members considered that PGRs were effective in representing the views of parents within their local authority. In addition, both these groups were more likely to identify PGRs as representing *parent governors*, rather than parents.

Recruiting and retaining PGRs

A particular difficulty with the PGR system of parental representation has been the recruitment and retention of PGRs. More than half of the CEOs reported having experienced difficulties in recruitment despite prolonged efforts. Various reasons were given for this.

- It was part of a broader problem concerning the recruitment of school governors in general.
- There was a lack of understanding as to what the role entailed.
- The workload and attendant responsibility were too great, particularly for a volunteer.
- Parent governors' chief interests lay in their own children's education and school.
- The timing of committee meetings conflicted with people's work commitments.
- The considerable volume of paperwork needing to be read and digested.

CEOs also reported cases of PGRs resigning before completing their term of office.

Induction and training

Almost nine out of ten CEOs and elected members considered it important for PGRs to receive a suitable induction and training in order for them to be able to undertake their role effectively. In spite of this, many CEOs and elected members said that, for the most part, PGRs had not been offered any dedicated induction or training specific to their work, but had received the same induction as that provided for any newly elected members. In a number of cases no induction or training had been provided at all.

Former PGRs and current PGRs confirmed a less than satisfactory situation in respect of induction/training. Only a third of the former PGRs and less than a half of current PGRs reported having received any form of preparation for the role. Even where some form of preparation had been available, the indications were that quite often it was perceived as not having been particularly effective and did not necessarily address PGRs' training needs.

The circumstances do appear to be improving, albeit somewhat slowly. For a great many PGRs it is first-hand experience of the role which leads them eventually to feel suitably equipped to fulfil the role.

Support for PGRs

A minority of both former and current PGRs were satisfied overall with what they had received in the way of ongoing support in their work from within their local authority. In terms of the support provided by specific groups, most were satisfied with the support they had received from CEOs, members of Governor Support teams, their fellow PGRs and other LEA officers. About half of current PGRs stated that they had been assigned a contact person or ‘mentor’ within the LEA. However, elected members and local headteachers were perceived as less involved and, therefore, less supportive.

External support for PGRs

External support measures included *central government support*, in the form of help and guidance from both the DfES School Government Team 2 and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

A majority of PGRs reported finding the DfES publications and conferences for PGRs broadly helpful. Direct contact with the DfES was not seen as being particularly helpful, although not all PGRs seemed aware that this was an avenue open to them.

The NFER’s contribution largely is technology-based – a dedicated Email system (PGRNET-list), website and newsletter (produced as both an email and a paper copy), designed both to inform and facilitate communication amongst PGRs. The PGRs valued the website, together with the periodic (termly) newsletters. The PGRNET-list and discussion forum were seen as broadly helpful by a good many, although some PGRs gave up on the former prior to its being moderated.

Reservations were voiced by PGRs about the DfES’ failure to persevere with the programme of national conferences, and it was widely felt that DfES could have done more to help shape a more favourable climate toward parent governor representatives at local government level.

The DfES and NFER also have overseen the development of PGR links at regional and national levels. Despite the best efforts of those directly involved, the regional meetings throughout have struggled to gain the support of PGRs, and their future seems in doubt. At the national level, the PGR Network Committee (NPGRC) was widely considered a good idea in principle, but constrained by the perceived attitude within the DfES of wanting to continue to exert control over the service.

Material support

Although many PGRs were aware that some funding had been made available by way of support, three quarters of the PGRs held the view that the financial support available was inadequate. Less than a third of current PGRs reported having been reimbursed for expenses incurred during the course of their work, or having received any form of allowance. Indeed, some had found it difficult to claim expenses. Around 10% of PGRs claimed to be unaware that funding was available.

CEOs and elected members saw wide discrepancies between the support PGRs needed - in terms of office space, secretarial support, attendance allowance, etc., - and that which actually was provided. By common consent these things would have made the PGRs' role much easier, although only a minority of the elected members felt it necessary for PGRs to have such support.

Being a PGR

Main areas of PGRs' work

Almost all PGRs saw attending formal meetings – committees and working parties - as their highest priority. Other important areas were interacting with parents, collaborating with their fellow PGRs and discussing parent issues with LEA officers/elected members.

Gaining access to parents

The whole question of how PGRs are able to access the views of parents is seen as central to their credibility when they claim to represent the parental view. In seeking to gain access, PGRs suggested that informal approaches were more successful than formal, pre-arranged events where PGRs and parents were purposefully brought together.

However, 82% of PGRs overall reported finding it very difficult to gain access to parents. They believed that most parents were unaware of their presence. It is perhaps surprising, in view of this, and the perceived importance of PGRs' access to parents, that very few CEOs attached priority to publicising the PGRs' presence and work.

Job satisfaction

Almost half of PGRs believed that morale among their fellow PGRs was low, and more than a third felt that there was no-one to whom they could turn for help. That said however, 72% of current PGRs reported that personally they found the work rewarding. Greatest reward derived from the sense of representing parents in the council chamber and being involved in helping to shape the future of education service delivery.

Perceived effectiveness of the PGR system

Less than a third of PGRs perceived that the present system had been effective, even at the local level, in representing the views of parents. At regional level, the general feeling was that they had not been at all effective in representing parents. Most CEOs, too, were

not convinced that the work of PGRs was benefiting the community. Quite a number of CEOs and elected members considered that parent governor representatives' effectiveness had a great deal to do with the calibre of the individuals occupying the position, rather than being a characteristic of the *role* itself.

There was a strong view among PGRs that the creation of a national representative body would substantially improve matters and enable them to afford parents a better say on educational matters. 77% of current PGRs and 74% of former PGRs reported being in favour of such a body being set up.

Significant difficulties and challenges

PGRs identified three main limitations on their work.

- The shortfall of time, given the scope and complexity of the role.
- Lack of respect shown toward them by LEA officials and especially elected members, coupled with a lack of interest in their work and the absence of support.
- Difficulties of communication, more especially with parents.

Other significant challenges for PGRs to become a more effective service included the following.

- The need to recruit more PGRs, and of a high calibre.
- The need of a more effective means of inducting newcomers into the role and providing them with the necessary ongoing support and development.
- The need for more equal treatment in relation to elected members.
- The need to publicise their existence within local communities far more effectively.
- The need to achieve greater recognition of what they had to offer.

Very few CEOs and elected members felt that the work of PGRs had developed significantly over the first three or so years of their existence. They further perceived that PGRs often encountered quite serious difficulty in carrying out the duties expected of them. In particular, they recognized the problematic nature of PGRs consulting with and reporting back to parents and parent governors.

Other significant difficulties the CEOs and members identified included the following.

- The heavy workload associated with the PGR role.
- The lack of time PGRs had to give to the role.
- The volume of paperwork to be read and digested prior to attending council meetings.
- PGRs' lack of understanding of the committee structure and how it functions.
- PGRs' regularly being unable to attend formal council meetings because of work or parenting commitments.

Good practice

In spite of the many difficulties identified above, PGRs themselves remained optimistic about the capacity of the PGR system to represent the views of parents in the local community. Examples of current ‘good practice’ for ensuring their effectiveness included **the following.**

- Being provided essential information, followed by further, periodic briefings and feedback sessions.
- Enjoying active support from both the political and professional leadership of the local authority.
- Having been assigned a named link officer to serve in a support capacity.
- Practising PGRs being directly involved in helping to develop an induction and support package for new members of the service.
- Having existing or recently retired PGRs serve in a mentoring/advisory capacity.
- Including PGRs on the circulation list of all draft documents for consultation.
- Support with communications from dedicated staff of the local authority press office.
- Facilitating PGR inclusion in strategic groups within LEAs, such as an education advisory group.
- Providing the necessary administrative back up.
- Accompanying elected members on visits to schools.
- The sharing of ideas and other manifestations of teamwork involving the PGRs within a local authority.
- PGRs being proactive and gaining recognition as a result.
- Articles written for inclusion in an annual report, typically at LEA or local governor level, although some PGRs produced their own annual report specifically for parents.
- Having a dedicated governor on each governing body to serve as a point of liaison.
- Pursuing close links with the local Parent network; alternatively, helping to establish such a network.
- Regular consultation evenings involving parents and/or LEA officers or both.

Key issues and propositions

DfES, NFER and the structure of the PGR Service

1) Our findings indicate that support from DfES and NFER is seen by PGRs as well-intentioned but not as effective as it needs to be. Systems are in place at the strategic level but there is concern that this does not necessarily translate to the operational level.

Proposition:

- Efforts need to be made to re-think and improve the support mechanisms provided by these agencies.

2) The research suggests that there are currently too many CEOs and elected members who do not have faith in the system of parent governor representatives. They perceive that the introduction of PGRs into the system is a cause of potential tension with some elected members and other school governors. They also have serious concerns about the recruitment and retention of PGRs.

Proposition:

- It is important for the DfES to be more explicit about the way in which the PGR system of parental representation is to be managed at local level. The duties and responsibilities of local government, in facilitating the work of PGRs, are defined at a level of generality which allows for too broad an interpretation in terms of recruitment, induction/training and support, and funding.

3) The National Network Committee (NPGRC) does not appear to be sufficiently valued by PGRs as yet, nor seen to function particularly effectively. It would benefit from further development – which appears now to be happening, although its credibility with the PGR rank and file would appear to remain low.

Proposition:

- It is not enough for the DfES simply to say that the Network Committee is *the* link between PGRs and central government. The evidence suggests that few PGRs are convinced of this. The Network Committee is seen by PGRs to be strongly influenced by the DfES and its allies. In order to alter this perception, the DfES needs to encourage the Committee's membership to mature into the role, to allow them to become more autonomous and assume greater responsibility. The Committee ought surely to take on the principal responsibility for determining all aspects of the future development of PGR practice nationwide. In order for this to happen the status of the Committee chair would benefit from some enhancement, including extending the term of office beyond the present single year, during which time it is all the chair can do to come to terms with the nature of the role. Having a term of office of two or

even three years would allow the chair to settle into the role and devise a plan of action, based on identified objectives and strategies for attaining those objectives.

Recruitment and retention of PGRs

4) Under the central government legislation, the term of office for PGRs is set at a minimum of two years and a maximum of four years. The evidence from the research suggests that postholders do ‘grow’ into the role, and also underlines the steepness of the initial learning curve for those newly appointed. The research further shows that for a good many PGRs it can take the best part of two years before they feel they have come to terms with what the role entails and are in a position to be effective.

Proposition:

- PGRs should have a minimum term of office of not less than three years, and ideally, four years. Less than this and they are unlikely to have fully come to terms with their role.

A four year term of office also would bring PGRs in line with arrangements for local councillors. It is challenging and time-consuming for PGRs and a group of elected members to develop good working relationships. It would be helpful not to have to repeat the process part-way through the respective terms of office.

5) Recruiting PGRs is frequently problematic, and in some cases it has proved impossible to attract *any* candidates, let alone those of a high standard. Nevertheless, one of the lessons of the research is that being a lone operator presents an enormous challenge and can prove very difficult. The research indicates that having two or more PGRs in post at any given time can bring huge advantages over the lone operator.

Proposition:

- While the legal requirement is for a minimum of two PGRs, the reality is that some LEAs have experienced great difficulty in making two appointments. Notwithstanding this, LEAs should be strongly encouraged to make even greater effort to appoint the minimum of two PGRs, preferably more. The great disadvantage with a single PGR is that unless he or she is quite exceptional, they may well remain isolated and ineffective. Certainly, there are very real limits to what a single PGR can hope to cover and achieve, even if s/he is fortunate enough to be working within a supportive local authority. Consideration ought to be given to the possibility of easing the formal requirements on local authorities regarding conducting PGR elections.

6) Given that recruitment can be problematic, with very few elections being highly competitive, and with candidates all too often being elected unopposed, this raises the issue of the calibre, or quality, of those who make it through to become PGRs.

Propositions:

- Local authority officers and officials, the DfES and others should do all in their power to make the role of a PGR attractive and one which carries status and prestige within the local community, in the hope that elections can become more of a contest between strong candidates. The full weight of the government and DfES needs to be directed to encouraging parent governors of high quality to come forward, so that there will be some chance of PGRs of a high standard emerging from the pool.
- Current PGRs should seek - as some already do - to identify and encourage potential successors, even to the extent of inviting interested parent governors to observe carefully selected aspects of their work. The involvement of PGRs in parent governor training is also significant in this regard, in that it offers the possibility of parent governors in schools being able to establish more effective communications with parents and of equipping them with the competencies to do so. Consequently, longer term, these parent governors ought to be more capable of fulfilling the vital liaison function between parents, on the one hand, and PGRs, on the other hand.

Induction/Training

7) There is a pressing need for a planned programme of induction and possible further training, the latter covering, e.g. the skills of public speaking, negotiating skills, the skills of strategic thinking and planning. Above all else, PGRs need to be equipped to be able to perform effectively in the Scrutiny and other committee forum, and on working parties and task groups, since these are the settings where they are most visible and where judgements about them by elected members and LEA officers can readily be made. Unless they are perceived as credible in their role, it can but be an uphill struggle.

The need for a common standard of induction has been recognised within the DfES, and arrangements are in hand, involving the DfES, members of the PGR Network Committee and representatives of the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS), for some form of induction package to be developed and trialled.

Propositions:

- It is to be hoped that this official recognition will improve matters considerably. The current situation where induction is something of a lottery and where there is reliance on PGRs 'growing' into the role, has been seen to be inefficient and wasteful, not to say anxiety-inducing on the part of PGRs. Nevertheless, we would suggest that there still may be a need for formal skills training along, say, the lines outlined above, and urge PGRs, in the shape of the Network Committee, local authority representatives and the DfES to give consideration to this possibility.
- Induction and training should be of a common high standard in all parts of the country, and monitored. It should be made clear whose responsibility it is to deliver it. Where high quality induction has been provided, PGRs' morale is high and they feel prepared to fulfil their role.

- A planned succession is vital. One of the lessons of the research is that, as a matter of course, the experience and wisdom gained in the role by the outgoing postholders ought to feature far more prominently and deliberately in any preparation of those who are new to the role. Every effort should be made to have overlapping periods of tenure so that outgoing PGRs can act in a mentor capacity and, for a period at least, work alongside their successors.

Support for PGRs

8) There is no statutory entitlement to support for PGRs. There are generalized statements about parent governor representatives receiving support and training but no structures or mechanisms for delivery in any of the statutes. PGRs are informed, ‘You *can expect support* from a number of areas... your local education authority will (*note*, is not obliged to) provide you with induction into your new role, providing the essential information you will need to get started’, and that support will be provided by officers of the LEA. It goes on: ‘You *might* also gain help from your local governor association or parent/teacher association’, and that ‘You *should* (*note*, not will) be able to approach these (i.e. officers of the authority)’.

Proposition:

- A guaranteed national entitlement of support should be given to PGRs – explicitly stating by whom and when it will be given - in all those areas where there is currently a vague generalization about what they might expect. This would, of course, entail central government in further modifying - *and strengthening* - the relevant legislation, and also making available additional funding which is earmarked for use in supporting PGR services.
- CEOs in particular, and other senior officers, and possibly the Cabinet member for Education, need to engage periodically with the PGRs in reviewing the work they are doing, helping to identify possible ways of developing their service further, possible means of overcoming difficulties or frustrations, and so forth.

Of course, it is not for CEOs and others to *tell* PGRs what to do or how to do their job, but rather to work with them to explore possibilities, to see what in the way of facilitation may be required, and so on. It is providing them with the necessary strategic guidance and support.

9) All too often it would appear that elected members’ first introduction to PGRs is when they attend their first formal committee meeting - a daunting experience in its own right, according to many PGRs, and an occasion when their (PGRs’) attention and concerns are likely to lie with the impending committee meeting, rather than with self-publicity.

Propositions:

- Local authorities need to ensure that new councillors also are informed about the existence of PGRs and what they are there for, the importance attached to them/their work by the CEO and other senior LEA officers, the DfES, etc., as well as being given a personalised introduction.
- CEOs have a key role to play in welcoming the PGRs and setting the ‘right tone’ – e.g. demonstrating that the role is important, that they are valued - so that PGRs have an increased chance of meeting with a similarly positive reception right across the local authority. CEOs also have a responsibility for securing the commitment to PGRs of the Cabinet member for Education, whose active support for the PGRs, both direct and indirect, is crucial.

10) PGRs have to engage with elected members by definition, and the evidence of the research is that this can be where difficulties arise which may threaten to undermine PGR confidence and morale.

Proposition:

- Local authorities should give serious consideration to introducing some form of ‘buddying’ arrangement, whereby every PGR is linked with an elected member, who undertakes to act as his or her ally and facilitator in the council chamber, e.g. ‘schooling’ PGRs in the ways in which committees operate – both the visible and the hidden – committee protocols, etc. Clearly, this would need to be a volunteer, someone who was willing to serve in this capacity, and possessing the necessary inter-personal qualities and attributes.

11) Some PGRs have been assigned a member of staff within the LEA – typically, a senior member of the Governor Support team – to serve as their first point of contact, offering guidance and assistance, as necessary, acting as facilitator, including introducing them to other key staff, of whose help or support they may have need, helping them to resolve difficulties and so forth. The evidence of the research however suggests that nearly half of current PGRs lack such a figure, despite its obvious value.

Proposition:

- All PGRs should have a member of staff within the LEA assigned to serve as their first port of call.

12) Central government legislation was widely regarded among the PGRs as being too loose in respect of what was required of local authorities, vis: ‘as a parent governor representative you can expect support from a number of areas’, ‘acceptable expenses would include travel and subsistence, child care, financial loss allowance...and stationery costs’.

Proposition:

- Local authorities too must assume their responsibility for making the PGR system effective. In part, this entails openly embracing the PGRs and acting to make them an integral part of local council services. There is also the need for broader back-up resources and facilities to be made available by the local authority as a matter of course, e.g. augmented funding, secretarial support, access to press office, access to reproduction facilities, use of the internal mail system, child care, along with certain guaranteed allowances, e.g. child care, attendance at formal meetings. Not only would this make the role itself more attractive - which could lead to more parent governors coming forward and standing for election as PGRs - but it ought to make it easier for PGRs to discharge the role. Surely there is no valid reason for why PGRs should not enjoy the same material support as other members of the council.

While the most supportive of local authorities are already doing this, to ensure that others follow suit will require that the legislation be tightened so that the present flexibility in interpretation cannot be used by local authorities as an excuse to avoid their responsibilities, should they so choose. PGRs who are currently struggling to secure even the most basic forms of support would dearly love to be able to refer to guarantees enshrined within the legislation as they press their local authority for better backing and support.

In saying this we are aware of the sensitivities within central government concerning its relations with local government. However, there would seem a compelling need for some basic consistency in practice across local authorities. Certainly, those at the sharp end recognise this as very necessary.

The work of PGRs

13) To fulfil the duties of a PGR effectively takes more time than most people are able to give on a volunteer basis. By definition they are also parent governors, which is a large task in itself, and many are in full-time or part-time employment. Committee meetings invariably take place during the working day, thus posing problems of attendance, especially as there is no obligation on employers to provide time off work, unlike as for members.

The research also shows that some LEAs have assigned PGRs to a range of committees over and above that covered by the legislation (i.e. Overview and Scrutiny, Admissions Forum), along with working parties and task groups.

Proposition:

- Any discussion about the PGR role must give consideration as to *the how* – that is, what it is feasible for PGRs to take on, given that they are volunteers and invariably constrained for time; and what are realistic strategies to pursue. Local authority personnel need to consider very carefully what it is reasonable to ask of PGRs. Care needs to be taken not to overload them, which may entail asking hard questions about

where else, apart from Overview and Scrutiny and the Admissions Forum, the PGR contribution really could be valuable.

Gaining access to parents

14) Parent governor representatives are not universally seen as being effective representatives of parents because they have no formal means of gaining access to parents' views. There is no structure for so doing. There is nothing in DfES policy that makes explicit what LEAs must – or even should – do to facilitate this process, merely a list of possible means for contacting parents. The DfES guidance for PGRs states: 'Ask your local LEA what arrangements have been put in place for consulting parents'. There is nothing about LEAs being *obliged* to put arrangements in place. The guidance notes also say: '...a set of local groups could lead into a local authority-wide forum'. But who is going to make this happen? Also that 'The local governor association *may be able to offer you*: a mechanism for communicating with parents; an insight into local issues; background on specific local issues'. But what if it does not? What are feasible strategies for enabling PGRs to deliver on being 'the voice of the parent'?

Propositions:

- As the Government's intention for PGRs is parental representation, the constituency of parents they are to represent should be clearly defined and then effective structures need to be put in place for ensuring that PGRs are able to reach those whom they represent. Similar structures also must be in place for PGRs to report back to their constituents.
- An important message of the research is that PGRs should channel their energy and efforts into parent governors, seeing them as the critical link between themselves and parents. Potentially, this offers a realistic means of PGRs *getting a feel for* what parents think about particular aspects of educational provision or policy, *or a sense of* any concerns they may have. PGRs can augment this by other means, such as ad hoc interactions and exchanges with parents at the school gates or on the playground.

For anything more comprehensive and systematic there are very real time and logistical constraints on already overstretched PGRs. The one exception to this is where a particular issue is under consideration by the LEA. In these circumstances PGRs might well be asked to undertake a very focused, fact-finding exercise, by means of, say, a survey questionnaire to substantial numbers of parents or households – as indeed a number of the PGRs had done, often to great effect.

- LEAs and schools should, nevertheless, seek to put in place effective structures for ensuring that PGRs are able to reach the parents they represent, and thereby develop their constituency. As previously stated, PGRs have neither the time nor the facilities to undertake this task. The alternative is to accept that PGRs will be *representative of parents*, rather than parents' representatives – which in practice is what a good many have settled for, although this is not what the government says it wants.

- Headteachers should be strongly urged by the local authority to offer assistance to PGRs in their efforts to establish contact with parents. They should be required to notify parents of the existence of PGRs and their function, and be invited to make their school available, periodically, for PGR and parent meetings, at the PGRs' request.
- The basics of communicating with parent governors and parents can be approached via such means as utilising the existing channels for governors and the free council circulars which go out to all households – as a number of PGRs indeed were doing. There are however other possible avenues which could be explored, such as making greater use of the local media, e.g. TV and radio, or the press. The support of the mass media could be enlisted to encourage parents to voice their opinions or feelings on certain issues or topics, e.g. through 'phone-ins'. PGRs might also look to establish a number of parent forums, these particular parents serving to represent the wider body of parents.

Concluding Remarks

Firstly, progress has been and continues to be made. There is firm evidence of practice getting better in a good many local authorities - as is evident from the differences in the respective experiences of the current and former PGRs.

Secondly, and related, it takes time for postholders to 'grow' into the role and to establish effective, stable practice, especially as we are talking about volunteer practice and on a part-time basis. Also, it will take time for the system of parent governor representatives to be accepted by officers and elected members, and even longer by school staff and parents. There is however evidence that the process of acceptance has begun where the PGRs have been well-supported.

Thirdly, in spite of the undoubted strides taken, there is still a long way to go in a great many local authorities. There is much still needing to be done if parent governor representatives are to become an established feature on the education scene, and fulfilling the role envisaged for them by central government.

Fourthly, the essential fragility of services needs constantly to be borne in mind. This fragility can arise for a number of reasons: a failure to be able to recruit the successors to previously highly effective practitioners, resignations, illness and even death. What can be done about this? Having several PGRs in post affords some protection against the ravages of ill-health or resignations. Publicising the service more effectively would help, as would central and local government actively working to make the role more attractive. In addition, the service would benefit from better and more realistic resourcing.

Fifthly, in response to the question:

To what extent does the existence of a structure for (parent) participation in policymaking mean that participation actually occurs, and additionally, that it has some effect?

the research leads us to conclude that structure alone can only achieve so much. The time that PGRs are able to devote to the role is an important determinant of what can be achieved, as is the calibre of the individual postholder.

As for whether the creation of PGRs has brought about more by way of parental participation in education policy making, and to some effect, it depends what is meant by 'parental participation'. There was very little to suggest that substantial numbers of parents have a strong desire to be directly involved in education policy making at local authority level and are so involved. For the most part, parents' concerns reside in their own children and the schooling they receive. Occasionally, the focus may become wider – if, say, the quality of that schooling is perceived as being very poor, or where the local school is threatened with the possibility of closure.

On the other hand, in those local authorities where the parent governor representatives have been effective, or reasonably so, the views of parents are now being introduced into the council chamber and being taken note of. Furthermore, there is now an increased awareness and a preparedness on the part of LEA officers and elected members to consider how policy proposals might play out with parents. But we would have to stress that all the evidence to date suggests that achievements are in essence relatively modest. To a large degree this is a reflection of the range and severity of the difficulties which many PGRs have faced.

Sixthly, the role is both necessary and worth doing. Indeed, if anything it is likely to become even more crucial given developments already in train in central government thinking – such as the Children Bill.

In a speech earlier this year, as part of the government's 'Big Conversation' initiative, David Blunkett addressed the issue facing central government of the need to connect politics and people, as part of helping to fashion healthy, vibrant local communities. He spoke of the importance which the Labour government attached to building a meaningful partnership with parents, of the significance of 'building from the bottom up', of the need to empower citizens so that they might assume greater responsibility for their lives and communities.

In the form of the parent governor representative, the government arguably has a potentially very powerful force for helping to transform rhetoric into a reality. However, PGRs need to be supported in this – truly supported, with the funding and other resources needed to carry out this task, together with the active 'climate shaping' that is both symbolically significant and necessary. At present it is hard to avoid concluding other than that PGRs are being sent into battle with one arm strapped behind their backs.