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Parent views of school engagement and an online portal

Summary of key findings

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Introduction and methodology

Introduction

- The Improvement Service and SEEMiS Group commissioned Ipsos MORI Scotland to undertake some exploratory qualitative research into parents', carers' and guardians'¹ views on current communication with their school and on an online portal for parents and schools.
- In order to gauge demand for, and acceptance of, the development of such a service, seven focus groups were conducted among parents, pupils and representatives from the National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFS). The key findings from the research are outlined in this summary report.

Methodology

- A series of focus groups was undertaken in June and July 2017. The primary focus of the research was to gauge the views and opinions of parents. Therefore, five focus groups were conducted among parents of school aged children. A further two groups were conducted:
 - a group with NPFS representatives²
 - a group with young people (aged 16-18).

Sampling and recruitment of participants

- Discussion groups were held in 5 council areas across Scotland. These were selected by the research team (in discussion with the Improvement Service and SEEMiS Group) to ensure that both urban and rural areas were included in the research.
- As it was anticipated that the levels and methods of communication would differ between primary and secondary schools, each group included parents with children at either primary or secondary school. If a parent had children at both primary and secondary school, they were asked to discuss the relevant sector only. Three groups were held with parents of children at secondary school and two groups with parents of children at primary school (Table 1).

Table 1. Breakdown of groups

Group	Gender	Child's age	Socio-economic status	Rurality
Group 1	Mixed	Primary	ABC1	Large urban area
Group 2	Mixed	Secondary	C2DE	Large urban area
Group 3	Mixed	Secondary	ABC1	Small town
Group 4	Mixed	Primary	C2DE	Small town
Group 5	Mixed	Secondary	Mixed	Rural area

¹ In the interest of brevity, participants will be referred to as 'parents' for the rest of the report.

² An organisation representing Parent Councils across Scotland: <http://www.npfs.org.uk/>

- Participants of the parent groups were recruited face-to-face (i.e. in street/door to door) by Ipsos MORI's specialist recruitment team.
- We also aimed to conduct groups that included a varied profile of parents, so recruited a mix of participants based on the following:
 - gender
 - internet usage (High, medium or low)
 - socio-economic status
- Ten participants were recruited for each discussion group, with the intention of 8 attending.
- The young persons' group was recruited through Young Scot³ and the NPFS representatives were invited to attend via the NPFS office.

Focus groups

- Each group was conducted by a member of the core research team, using a discussion guide to ensure consistency between groups.
- Content of the groups varied between the different audiences. The groups with parents and NPFS representatives covered the following topics:
 - current levels and methods of communication between schools and parents
 - parents' preferences in terms of method of communication
 - what the online portal would mean for parents/what it may allow them to do/access via this online service
 - parents' reactions to the proposed portal – including online security concerns and recommendations for its development.
- The young persons' discussion group focused on the following points:
 - what information should parents receive from the school
 - who should provide consent and personal information about older pupils to schools
 - whether certain communications should be a pupil or a parent's responsibility
 - reactions to the proposed online portal – with a focus on who should have access/control.
- Focus groups were approximately 90 minutes in length, with the young persons' group lasting 60 minutes.

Analysis of qualitative data

All of the focus groups were audio-recorded (with participants' permission) and transcribed for analysis purposes. The transcripts were then systematically analysed to identify themes that emerged in relation to each question in the discussion guide, along with key points and illustrative verbatim comments. This ensured that the analysis of the data was rigorous, balanced and accurate, and that key messages or concepts were brought out. It was also flexible enough to allow links and connections across different themes or sub-themes to be made.

³ <http://young.scot/>

Interpretation of qualitative data

Unlike survey research, qualitative social research does not aim to produce a quantifiable or generalisable summary of population attitudes, but to identify and explore the different issues and themes relating to the subject being researched. The assumption is that issues and themes affecting participants are a reflection of issues and themes in the wider population concerned. Although the extent to which they apply to the wider population, or specific sub-groups, cannot be quantified, the value of qualitative research is in identifying the range of different issues involved and the way in which these impact on people.

Current methods of communication

How are schools communicating with parents?

Parents said that schools communicate with them in a number of different ways. Email, letter and text were the most common communication methods mentioned for day-to-day contact, although some participants reported that their school also disseminated information via social media platforms, usually Twitter and Facebook. Although there was a feeling that some schools were moving towards online methods, all parents were still receiving at least some communication via paper methods (e.g. a letter sent home with their child).

- **Email and letters** were commonly used to inform parents about upcoming school trips, events or meetings at the school and to communicate key information.
- The use of **text messages** varied, from notifying parents of their child's absence from, or late arrival at, school to notifying or reminding parents about an upcoming school event or meeting.
- Although some parents stated their school used a combination of email *and* letter to convey such information, others said that their school had moved towards **online methods** and away from paper communications. In these situations, it was common for parental consent forms, for example, if their child was going on a trip or playing in a school sports team, to be the only paper communication that they received.
- The implementation and use of other **online methods** of communication and interaction varied widely from school to school, even within a single local authority. However, some parents were aware of their school using things like Online Schools Payment solutions, Twitter and Facebook.
- **Face-to face communication** with the school was not frequent, especially among parents of secondary school-aged children. Parents reported that this kind of interaction tended to be isolated to parents' evening or if they need to discuss a specific issue or problem their child was experiencing (for example, bullying or specialist support).

How do parents contact schools?

If parents needed to contact the school, they would phone or email the office, or talk to school staff face-to-face. However, this varied depending on whether their child was in primary or secondary school.

- Primary school parents said they either spoke to their child's teacher when attending school to drop off/pick up their child or phoned the office.
- Secondary school parents either called the main office or emailed the school. Going to speak to someone face-to-face was less common, unless they felt the matter was urgent.
- It was common for secondary school parents to phone or email the school's main office, and then be passed onto the correct member of staff. Parents tended not to have direct phone numbers or email addresses for individual teachers, unless they had previously made contact with them.

Are parents satisfied with the communication with schools?

Satisfaction with communication varied from school to school and parent to parent. Some schools were thought to be doing things right and parents were happy with the communication they received. However, even among parents who were generally satisfied, issues with the way the school communicated were still raised. Common points raised across all of the groups included:

- **Timing of communications** – Parents noted they often received notification about upcoming school events (e.g. concerts, subject choices meetings) at short notice. They found this to be problematic as it did not allow much time for them to ensure that they could attend the event or meeting, particularly if it meant arranging time off work. Primary school parents also raised a similar point of not being given enough time to prepare for these (e.g. fancy dress days).
- **The need to rely on other parents to find out key information about the school** – Some parents reported it was common for them to rely on other parents to learn information about the school. This was due to them either not receiving the relevant information from the school, or not knowing where to find the information they needed.
- **The usability of school websites** – Although not all parents participating in the groups had accessed school websites, those who had thought that they were out-of-date, difficult to use and ‘clunky’. If parents needed to find out term dates, they visited their local authority’s webpage which, in contrast, they usually found to be user-friendly.

The **young people** who took part in the research were in agreement on this issue. They, or their parents, rarely used the school website, citing the lack of usability and outdated links as the main reasons why.

- **A lack of information around what their child is learning/homework** – Parents of both primary and secondary aged children were not as aware as they’d like to be about their children’s learning. Although some were able to obtain this information from their child, this was less common among secondary parents who found it difficult to engage their child in a conversation about schoolwork. This meant that secondary parents, in particular, would like to be more informed on what their child was learning at school.

The **young people** we spoke to noted that there were online systems in place in their schools that parents could use to look to engage with their work. Examples included, Edmodo and Google Classroom. However, they also highlighted that the use of this type of software was never trialled and the packages used could change from one year to the next when pupils and parents had only just become accustomed to them.

Other points on communication which were specific to *individual groups* included:

- **The use of Facebook to communicate information** – Some parents were aware of their child’s school using Facebook to communicate information. Although some parents did use Facebook, there were those who did not have an account and/or felt this was not an appropriate method to use. In one of the secondary schools, some parents believed that certain information was only ever available on the school Facebook page, and those who do not access it were missing out on crucial information. It is unclear if this was in fact the sole way that this school was communicating with parents, or if other methods were being used, for example, email.

- **Quantity and relevance of emails** – A dominant view in one group was that parents received too many emails from the school, many of which were not actually relevant to them. This resulted in them often skim-reading emails, or only reading them if the subject line looked relevant; a tactic which they were aware could result in them missing key information. Indeed, some parents reported not reading or checking their emails at all.
- **Difficulty contacting secondary school teachers** – In some cases, parents of secondary school children reported waiting a long time to hear back from the correct member of staff, if phoning the school about an issue/concern. This was compounded by the fact that, in some of the schools, all communication had to be mediated by the child's guidance teacher. While parents could understand the reasoning behind this, they often found it difficult to identify who their child's guidance teacher was, particularly if this had changed during the school year. For these reasons, some parents felt that email was a more effective method as teachers could reply when they had a free period from teaching – although it was suggested that emailing about an issue or concern is not always appropriate if the topic was particularly important or sensitive.

The discussions highlighted that the methods and systems schools use to communicate are inconsistent between local authorities, schools and also classes, meaning that parents and pupils were receiving varying levels of information and support.

Parental preferences for communication

Email versus Letter

- Opinion was mixed between parents who preferred receiving letters sent home with their child and those who preferred online methods, such as email. Parents highlighted pros and cons to each method, but tended to stick with their preference:
 - Parents who preferred receiving information by letters sent home, felt they usually received the information (even if it they had to search their child's school bag) and liked that they had a paper record they could keep and refer back to. (This was particularly useful as some often did not check their email accounts or read their emails).
 - Parents preferred email because they thought it was more convenient, they did not have to search their child's school bag and they could refer back to them to check key information and/or dates.

Text message

- Although only used in a limited way (to notify parents of absence, lateness, homework not being completed or as a reminder for an upcoming event), parents were in favour of receiving text messages, as these were seen to be convenient.

Online preferences

When asked how they would prefer to receive various pieces of information or access services related to their child's schooling, even those parents who preferred traditional paper methods of communication were in favour of some of the information or services being available online, mostly due to the convenience.

- Information that parents would like to access online included:
 - basic school information

- o terms dates
- o details of any school inspections
- o lesson plans/class timetable
- o homework details

While **young people** were happy for their parents to receive information on the first three bullet points above online – and noted that they currently could do so – they were less convinced about the need to provide parents with information on lesson plans and homework. This was not because they were worried about their parents seeing the work that they were doing. Rather, it was because they felt that these aspects of school life were their responsibility and that intervention from their parents was unnecessary.

- Services that they would like to access online included:
 - o booking parents evening
 - o paying for school meals and trips
 - o applying for grants
 - o accessing their child's attendance record
 - o parental consent forms for online trips.

Young people were generally happy for their parents to take care of most of the administrative tasks listed above. However, they strongly felt that they should be able to provide their own permission for attending school trips or activities once they had turned 16. That said, they thought it was essential that parents were informed about these things.

- It is worth noting that some of the administrative services that parents would like to be able to access online, are already available via an online platform for some parents.
- Some parents have access to Online Schools Payment Systems to pay for school trips, meals and concerts etc. and others are able to book their parents' evening appointments online. However, none of the parents in the research had access to all of these services in a single school.
- Parents who were already using these online tools, were very positive about being able to access these services online.

Proposed online portal

Attitudes towards the possible introduction of such a service

Parents were informed about the prospective online portal and provided with user stories⁴ to illustrate how the system might work for parents in various circumstances, compared to how the system currently works. Parents were also provided with a grid illustrating the various information and services which may be made available through the online portal.

In most groups, the dominant view was that this would be welcomed, with parents feeling that they would find such a service beneficial, although they did express some concerns.

Perceived benefits

The positive aspects of the system were seen to be:

- **Convenience** – Online administrative services (such as paying for trips or booking parents' evening) were seen to be much more convenient than current processes⁵ – mainly as parents would be able to do this in their own time, without involving their child.
 - Currently, none of the parents were able to complete parental consent forms online, yet this is something that many felt would be much more convenient – especially if it meant that details previously entered would be saved on the system.

The convenience of the online portal was seen to be particularly beneficial by the **young people** as well. One young person gave the example of completing health and safety information forms for every school trip, even if not all of the questions were relevant (e.g. asking if they were able to swim when visiting Edinburgh Castle). They thought that if this information was stored online it could just be updated as and when required.

- **It is a 'One Stop Shop'** – Having all of the information in one place was thought to be very beneficial. Not only would it be more convenient for parents (as they do not have to go to various sources to get different pieces of information), but it would also mean that they are more likely to find information that they need – for example, about an upcoming event or trip.
- **Provides the parents with more control and information** – Parents believed the online portal would provide them with more control over their child's school life and calendar, and administrative tasks – helping them to be more organised and ensuring they do not miss key events.
 - Some secondary school parents expressed frustration at the current systems and the lack of information that they get from the school regarding upcoming events.

⁴ Provided by the Improvement Service and SEEMIS Group

⁵ For those parents who are not currently able to access such functions online

- Parents who were not able to book parents' evening appointments online were very enthusiastic about this function potentially being available to them, as it would allow them to book the appointments for a time that is convenient for them. Many parents cited issues with the current system⁶ including:
 - having difficulty attending at the given time
 - their child arranging appointments too early or appointments that are hours apart
 - not getting appointments for some subjects (secondary school parents)
 - feeling their child was 'cherry picking' appointments, selecting only the teachers they wanted them to see (secondary school parents).
- **Allows them to have access to information about their child's learning** – Parents reported that they receive little information about what their child is learning at school or details of their set homework, either from the school or their child. Parents, especially in secondary school groups, explained that their children were reluctant to tell them much about their school day or what they have been learning.
 - Parents (especially those of secondary school children) would welcome the option to have access to such information, feeling that it would help them engage their child in a conversation about a particular topic and be more involved in their learning.
 - Both primary and secondary school parents could see the benefit of being able to view their children's set homework, to ensure that they were doing the task correctly (primary school parents), or doing it at all/on time (secondary school parents).

There was some disagreement from **young people**. They did not feel that it was necessary to give their parents greater control over their school life. While they appreciated the convenient administrative aspects of the system that would be useful to their parents, the elements that would allow parents to engage more deeply with their learning were not viewed as positively. They felt that once a young person was over 16, although some argued for younger than this, they should be trusted to organise and make decisions about their own school life. This was raised with particular reference to making subject choices – there was strong disagreement that it should be the parents' role to apply for subject choices online.

Perceived concerns

Although parents generally had a positive reaction to the proposed online portal, they did raise some concerns:

- **Parents' internet access** – Although all of the parents who participated in the discussion groups had regular access to the internet, a common concern was that not all parents do.⁷ Therefore, they felt that some parents may be at a disadvantage if the information and services were not available through an alternative method.

This was a shared concern and was raised by the **young people** as well.

- **Relationship with the school** – Although parents were informed that the system is not intended as a replacement for face-to-face communication, parents were concerned that a such a system would harm their relationship with the school or that it may alienate them from the school and teaching staff, by limiting direct communication.

⁶ In secondary school the child is responsible for arranging parents' evening appointments and in primary these tend to be allocated

⁷ In rural areas the discussion was around poor internet connection, whereas in deprived areas, the issue was cost.

- **Teacher workloads** – Parents were curious about who would be responsible for updating/uploading the information/content to the online portal. Parents within most groups stated that teacher workloads are already high and that it would be impractical to increase their workload. Some also highlighted existing online sources, such as school websites, were rarely updated.
- **Inconsistent use between schools and classes** – Parents felt that if the online portal is not used in a universal way, or some schools are less efficient at uploading and updating content than others, then parents may get varying levels of benefit from this service.
- **Having to actively seek out the information** – Although having a resource where key information is all in one place was seen to be one of the key advantages of the online portal, parents felt that actively seeking out this information themselves (rather than the school distributing the information onto them) could be a risk. It was thought that parents may not check this regularly and therefore miss key pieces of information. They suggested that parents should be notified if there is something important for them to view on the online portal. It was thought that any notifications should be sent by text message, as not all parents receive email notifications or check their emails.
- **Security** – There were some issues raised regarding the security of the portal and the information held on it (see section on security).

Prioritising which services should be online

At each discussion group, parents were split into two groups and asked to select the services/functions that they felt would be most useful as part of the online portal. The exercise was used to understand which of these would be most beneficial to parents and to provide the Improvement Service and SEEMIS Group with an idea of which services and functions to prioritise.

- Although parents thought that many of the services/functions would be useful, those commonly cited as being *most useful* to parents across the various groups were mostly administrative tasks/functions:
 - booking parents' evening
 - applying for grants
 - parental permission slips
 - paying for trips, school meals etc.
 - information on school trips and events.
- Secondary school parents also specified that being able to report their child's absence from school online would be useful, as well as viewing their child's attendance record.
- Priorities went beyond administrative services and functions, although to a greater extent among secondary parents, and included accessing curriculum related information (i.e. viewing class timetables, homework and lesson plans), as they felt this would provide them with a greater understanding of what their child is learning at school – as they felt they had very little knowledge of this.

Security

Parents' views on the security of the portal were mixed:

- It was not common for parents to be overly concerned about the security around the online portal. They trusted that the platform would be made as safe as was necessary.
- This was also due to a sense that a lot of sensitive information is stored online, with personal details already at risk of being hacked. They felt that the information on the online portal is already available elsewhere, so no additional risk would be posed.
- Although less common, some parents expressed concerns about online security such as the risk of identity fraud or confidential information about their child being accessed by people who were not intended to see it. No matter what security measures were in place, they would still feel uneasy.

Children's access to the online portal

- Parents of primary school children were less likely to think that their children should have access to the portal, although some acknowledged that they might when they go to secondary school.
- The dominant viewpoint among secondary parents was that their children should have access to the account, although they should have restricted access via a separate log in. It was thought that this would avoid situations including:
 - declaring themselves as absent from school
 - opting in to a school trip that has not been approved by the parent
 - seeing information about their development that might then have a negative effect on their confidence.
- Parents were undecided what should happen to the account once their child turns 16 – if they should then get control of the account/full access to all of the account.

In contrast, the **young people** we spoke to were very clear that once a pupil turned 16 the focus of the portal should be on the pupil. They should have main control of the account and their parents should only have access to certain elements of this (mostly the administrative functions).

Even at a younger age they did not think their access to the account should be restricted beyond perhaps not allowing them to access payment systems.

Recommendations from parents on the development of such a service

Parents were asked to provide any recommendations or advice that they would have for those developing the system. The most common suggestions were:

- **Security:** ensure that appropriate security measures and restrictions are in place, including a secure log-in system.

- **Consider the end user:** make the system user-friendly and easy for parents to navigate otherwise it will simply not be used.
- **Pilot with parents:** conduct a pilot to ensure that parents do in fact find the software easy to use. It would also help to identify any 'bugs'/technical problems with the software before it is rolled out on a mass scale.
- **Have separate pupil access/log in:** give pupils access but in a limited way with a separate log-in.

N.B. This was in direct contrast to the feedback from the pupils who recommended the reverse (complete access to pupils and limited access to parents).

- **Use notifications:** send a text notification system to inform/remind them that there is something parents should view (e.g. new class timetable or upcoming school event or trip).
- **Opt-in system:** make the system voluntary, and give every parent the choice of whether to use it or not. This was frequently mentioned with reference to those who do not have access to the internet.
- **Sync to calendar system:** create a function where key dates from the portal can be synced to the calendar on their mobile phone.
- **Revision:** add information about exam revision – e.g. how much their child should be revising during study leave/what they should be revising.
- **Include a parent council section:** include a link or a section of the portal where parents can get information about their school's Parent Council.

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