

parentsportal.scot

Case Study: East Renfrewshire Council & parentsportal.scot

This case study looks at the introduction and use of parentsportal.scot in schools in East Renfrewshire. Scheduled for launch in early 2020, East Renfrewshire Council and its schools were faced with launching the new system during the first Covid lockdown and driving up use in a school year like no other.

East Renfrewshire Council's schools have been on a digital journey for a number of years.

The council introduced online school payments in 2018 and since then has been looking at ways of improving its digital offer to benefit both parents and school staff. A survey of parents in 2016 had revealed frustration with being repeatedly asked for information that they had already supplied, e.g. on permission slips for school trips. In addition, schools were using a proliferation of communications channels, making it difficult for parents to know where to find information and how best to contact their child's school (without calling the office).

The council's own task analysis of school office staff had also found that a significant amount of time was spent on routine, repetitive tasks that could be automated.

Parentsportal.scot offered a solution to all these issues. Developed by the Improvement Service and SEEMiS, it provides direct digital communications and secure access to parents to a wide range of online services and information about their child's education. This digital approach has been developed to improve the way in which schools engage with parents, making life easier for both parents and school staff. A parent can sign in using the mygovscot myaccount service, enabling them to view information about their child's education, pay for school meals, update their own data, and respond to school requests.

Enabling and creating a digital relationship between parents, pupils and schools

Want to know more?
contact

parentsportal.scot

Parentsportal was launched in the first East Renfrewshire schools in April 2020, just after the UK had entered lockdown and schools closed, and rollout continued in clusters until June 2020. The unusual situation did have some advantages, according to Julie Hughes, Project Officer in East Renfrewshire Council's Education Department. "Parents were a bit of a captured audience," she says. "They had nowhere to go but be in the house with their children so when we launched, we had their attention."

"On the other hand, it's been more difficult with Covid because we would normally have launched in an entirely different way."

The new launch involved providing support to schools online, rather than in-person training on in-service days, for example. Julie held drop-in sessions on Microsoft Teams each day for school staff who had any questions.

Another difference was the 'push' from the council to adopt the new system; schools were given more leeway around rollout than in pre-Covid times. "We had to take a bit of a softly, softly approach because schools had so much to deal with. So if a school wanted to ask questions and move forward, then we did it but we never really pushed it," explains Julie.

Instead, Julie kept feeding information to schools about what was available. For example, after creating permission forms for one school, she would make them available as templates to all schools rather than expecting each school to create their own forms. She regularly checks in with schools to see if there is anything they need support with and to get ideas for development that she can pass on to other schools in the area. It has been effective way of encouraging uptake.

"My job is not just to make it easier for office staff, it's to make sure that it's easier for parents. I think if a parent has less work to do to respond to something, they're more likely to do it, which makes life easier for office staff, so it's a win-win situation," she says.

As evidence, she points to the response rate for school trips when parental permission is sought via parentsportal.scot. One school had 66% of parents respond overnight, 75% by day 2, with an eventual response of 81% (30 out of 34 pupils). Another school reported a 68% overnight response, with 77% response by the time the trip took place only a few days later.

One primary school used parentsportal.scot for parent's night bookings with positive results. Feedback from parents included:

*"Very good service – it's great to have a choice to book a slot."
"So far so good, easy access to all information."*

"I think if a parent has less work to do to respond to something, they're more likely to do it, which makes life easier for office staff, so it's a win-win situation."

**Julie Hughes,
Project Officer,
East Renfrewshire Council**



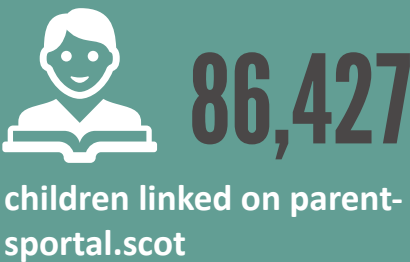
8
councils using parentsportal.scot in their schools



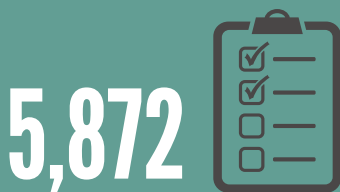
762
schools in Scotland live on parentsportal.scot



58,689
parents linked on parentsportal.scot



86,427
children linked on parentsportal.scot



5,872
East Renfrewshire Council annual data checks completed on parentsportal.scot - 44% of the total

In the 2021-22 academic year, Julie will be encouraging schools and parents to carry out the Annual Data Check through parentsportal.scot. Currently around a third of parents complete the check online but Julie is determined to increase this, visiting schools and sending regular emails to let them know it's available.

Impact and Results

Parentsportal.scot is available in all of East Renfrewshire Council's 32 schools. Uptake varies across schools, from 22% to 100% in June 2021, but is increasing at the new academic year gets underway. While the council isn't monitoring uptake, Julie says she does look at the figures to see if a school might need more support. "Secondary schools tend to perform better as parents can access reports and timetables online, which they like and it draws them in. Primary schools don't have this advantage but that will be our target next term, through using permissions to gather parents wishes in relation to their children," she says.

Among the benefits identified are improved efficiency in school offices and associated savings, greater engagement of parents with their child's education and reduced carbon footprint.

Improved engagement between schools and parents

As well as encouraging greater responsiveness from parents around things like permissions, many parents have appreciated the greater transparency that parentsportal.scot provides. One such instance is the ability to see their child's attendance and latecoming records. Anecdotally, says Julie, it has also allowed parents who live apart from their children to become more involved in their education.

Reduced carbon footprint

It's estimated that parentsportal.scot could save 6.6 million sheets of paper just by issuing report cards and the annual data check online. At the start of a typical school year, it's not unusual for schools to send home several permission forms for parents and pupils in addition to the annual data check. "We've got a responsible user agreement which goes to pupils about online behaviour, which parents have to sign, and a form for 'bring your own device'... there was the potential for about seven bits of paper to go home to parents. If we can take even half the ones that are left out of that equation, that's a lot of paper, and it's a lot of parents potentially going to find it easier to complete the form," says Julie.

Saving time and money

Given that the last school year has been far from normal, it has been difficult to measure savings from use of parentsportal.scot. The council was able to reduce the number of school office staff in anticipation of its introduction prior to the pandemic.

IS/SEEMiS have identified potential savings for councils and schools from online payments, which are much cheaper to process than cash

“There was the potential for about seven bits of paper to go home to parents. If we can take even half the ones that are left out of that equation, that’s a lot of paper, and it’s a lot of parents potentially going to find it easier to complete the form.”

Julie Hughes,
Project Officer,
East Renfrewshire Council

Lessons Learned

The main advice Julie would give is to ensure that your data is fit for purpose and parents’ email addresses are verified. East Renfrewshire Council cleansed their data using Data Hub prior to implementing parentsportal.scot. The data exercise also highlighted a problem with the use of the parental rights tick in SEEMiS that had to be amended prior to using parentsportal.scot.

Next Steps

East Renfrewshire Council will continue to explore new uses for parentportal.scot; Julie Hughes already has ideas from schools around The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award scheme and publishing exam timetables.

They are also planning more engagement with head teachers as previous experience shows that getting school leadership teams on side is key to driving uptake and use.

The council would also like to rationalise the communications technologies that schools use so that all parent communications go through parentsportal.scot. It makes life easier for parents if all information is in one place, and easier for office staff as they’re fielding fewer phone calls from parents.

“As long as portal keeps growing and has the additionality around the outside, we’ll just keep using it,” concludes Julie.

To find out more about parentsportal.scot:

Email: digitalpublicservices@improvementservice.org.uk

Visit: <https://parentsportal.scot>

Follow: @DPS_ImprovServ