The Scottish Consumer Council

Strengthening the links between parents, children and Scottish education providers

Over the past twenty years, the relationship between the providers and user of the Scottish education system has been subject to wide-ranging change. The old structures where parents seldom passed the school gate and children were seen but not heard seem archaic in today’s context of inclusion and participation. However, for many families, schools remain inaccessible and the education system as a whole remains unresponsive to their needs.

With the current debates highlighting choice, personalisation and participation in education, this briefing revisits the recent policy and research work of the Scottish Consumer Council to explore how far Scotland has come in creating a responsive, user-friendly education system.

How can we assess the responsiveness of education?

We assess the consumer perspective in any service, public or private, by analysing service provision against a set of consumer tests. For example, consumers can be empowered by exercising choice, through changing brands. However where choice is limited, the consumer tests of redress, representation and the provision of relevant and accessible information become increasingly salient.

The consumer tests become more, not less, important in the public sector as people are not often able to exercise choice in the services, instead services are provided to users, in some cases as powerless recipients. The consumer approach challenges this presumption and sees service users as active participants in the provision of services. How empowered they are as active partners depends on how well the services respond to the seven consumer tests.

THE CONSUMER TESTS

• Choice: can consumers choose the services they need or want?
• Information: are consumers provided with the information they need to make informed choices?
• Access: can consumers access the services they need or want?
• Redress: can consumers seek redress when things go wrong?
• Representation: are consumers’ views represented?
• Fairness: are consumers subject to arbitrary discrimination?
• Safety: are standards as high as they can be?
SCC believes that by applying these tests to education, policy makers can design and implement better quality and more responsive services. This paper discusses education in light of five of the seven consumer tests, but not safety or fairness. We believe that within an educational context, the issues of the safety and thus welfare of children within the school are better served by agencies working directly in the field. In relation to fairness, the principle of not discriminating against consumers unfairly is one which underpins all of our work and resonates through each of the consumer tests discussed here.

Who are the consumers of education?

Alongside the powerful interests of teachers, local authorities and central government, individual parents can be relatively powerless, however the duty to provide education rests with parents under the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. Further, the Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc Act 2000 increases the rights of parents to be consulted on education matters. The legislation is clear that parents are the key decision makers in their children’s education. It is this ability to make decisions and exercise choice which introduces a consumer perspective to education. As a 1997 SCC policy paper states:

Parents, then, are the ones who need to make decisions about use of education services, both to fulfil their responsibilities towards their children, and to ensure maximum benefits for children. It is in their capacity as decision-makers that the SCC takes an interest in parents and education.

As parents’ rights and responsibilities have developed so to have children’s rights, particularly since the UK ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1990. The Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc Act 2000 places a duty on education authorities to have regard to children’s views on decisions that will significantly affect them and includes an independent right of a child to appeal exclusion orders, given sufficient age and maturity. All children have this right but children aged twelve or over are presumed to have sufficient age and maturity.

While legislation does not provide children with the ultimate power over decisions that parents have (for example, the decision to attend a particular school) they do ensure that children are involved in the decision making process.

Parents, children and young people face numerous decisions throughout their years of involvement with the education system. These choices are both individual, focusing on which school to attend and what subjects to study, and collective, involving parents and students in decision-making structures such as pupil councils and school boards. They also encounter and are affected by decisions made for them by schools, local authorities and the Scottish Executive, decisions which often impact on their choice and the services available to them.

In relation to parents, children and young people as decision-makers, and therefore consumers of education, SCC suggests a continuum of decision-making power:

- In the pre-school years, the decision power rests almost completely with the parents.
- In primary school, the decision making power remains with the parent though the child’s right to be consulted begins to increase their decision making power.
- In secondary school, the decision making power is shared between parents and children who are considered of sufficient age and maturity to have regard given to their opinions.

This continuum brings us to the end of compulsory schooling at 16 where the decision making power has transferred to the young person, for example in their choice of whether or not to pursue further or higher education, though in reality many parents will remain heavily involved in those decisions.

To date, much of SCC research and policy development has centred on the role of parents as consumers of education, and while we retain that focus we are supportive of the work being carried out in the public and voluntary sector to improve children’s rights.
Parents, children and young people should be able to exercise choice in the educational services they need or want.

The existence of choice in education, and of parents and young people’s right to exercise that choice, is the basis of the arguments discussed above concerning the consumer within education services.

Within educational services, choice is most obviously available in the pre-school years where parents can select services for their children from public, private and voluntary providers. Within pre-school education and care there are clear governmental aims to create affordable, accessible childcare, however in practice the level of complexity in the system complicates this with many different types of providers offering a range of different services. It is unclear at present whether these services, or the packages of services available to parents, meet their needs.

One of the most important choices in education is the choice of school. From our national survey of parents we know that while most parents know something about how to change school, less than a quarter had actually considered it, with parents who themselves have higher education qualifications more likely than those without to have considered this option. Most of those who had considered a different school chose the current school because of its reputation, see chart 1 (SCC, 2002a).

Chart 1. Reasons why parents sent their child to current school (n=232)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Because it had a better reputation</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it was nearer</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it would best cater for child's needs</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To receive a good education</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because their siblings went to this school</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No choice/ unable to get into other school</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't Know</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parents in Scotland are able to exercise choice in the school their child/ren attend through placing requests. Children are automatically allocated a school based on catchment area however if parents would prefer a different school, they are able to apply for a placing request. The numbers of placing requests made have been decreasing in recent years1. Given this situation, anecdotal evidence suggests that some parents are exercising choice of their child’s school in other ways, for example by choosing to move to a different catchment area. Little is currently known about the extent to which these methods are employed by parents to exercise choice over their child’s school.

Information

Parents, children and young people should have the information they need, presented in the way they want, to enable them to make informed choices.

The consumer principle of information requires that we review services in relation to whether consumers have the information they need. Despite the fact that parents require information in order to make informed decisions and fulfil their parental duty, SCC research suggests that there are important gaps in the information provided to parents.

There are a range of different types of information that parents may require in order to make informed decisions:

- information about their child’s behaviour and educational progress;
- information about their child’s school;
- information about policies and issues to do with education.

Information about children’s behaviour and performance is conveyed primarily through regular parents’ evenings. We found that over 97% of parents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the information obtained about their children at these events. Similarly, over 90% of parents agreed that the school gave them clear information on their child’s progress (SCC, 2002a). In relation to information on the curriculum, around half of the parents surveyed knew a great deal about helping their child with subject choices but 40% admitted knowing a little about this and 5% knew nothing at all suggesting that information provision could be stronger in this area. Similarly, around a third knew a great deal about the examination system however over half said they knew only a little and 9% knew nothing at all (SCC, 2002a).

While this survey research with parents suggests that in many cases parents are happy with the level of information provided, the situation from qualitative research with disadvantaged parents (including those on low incomes, those from Black and minority ethnic communities and those living in geographically remote areas) suggests a different story (SCC, 2002b).

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For many in the focus groups, the relationship between teachers and parents was seen to affect the information they received. For example, there was a concern that teachers were not always being honest to parents and were telling them what they wanted to hear. Further, communication with teachers was seen to depend very much on the personality of the teacher, with some better at communicating with or listening to parents than others.

Parents also argued that the information provided was affected by the language used by teachers, there were examples given of teachers using language which would confuse parents, either accidentally or allegedly on purpose. On the other hand, some parents felt that teachers were using simplistic language to be patronising. The inclusion of parents from black and minority ethnic communities highlighted the problems some schools have with providing these groups with information, language was a barrier for the Cantonese group as an interpreter was not always available though they note that the school did try to get one for parents evening. Similarly, written communication at secondary school was found to be mostly through newsletters, permission slips and report cards, creating difficulties for the Cantonese group who felt that translation of written information was important.

Information about their child’s school is conveyed in several ways, through handbooks and websites for example. The SCC explored parents’ knowledge of school inspections, to examine how informed parents were of the quality of the school provision. Overall, 25% of parents did not know whether HM Inspectorate of Education had inspected the school. While it is common practice for a copy of the inspection report to be sent to all parents, only 50% of parents reported that they had received any feedback (SCC, 2002a).

There are a number of sources of information for parents: teaching staff, education officers within the local authority, national websites such as Parentzone (www.parentzone.gov.uk) and independent providers of advice and information often based in the voluntary sector.

‘Where do they go for advice?’ (SCC, 2001) looked specifically at the views and experiences of parents in relation to educational information and advice. This research found that the school and local authorities are the main providers of information on education to parents. Parents are therefore reliant on teachers’ knowledge, which they feel may be fallible, or on the advice of schools or local authorities that may not be perceived as independent. Where parents are faced with specific issues such as Additional Support Needs or home education they express a need to go beyond the school for information.

Our review of independent advice agencies found that in most cases the advice agencies were staffed by volunteers providing general advice with few trained in the specifics of education, which was only part of the remit of the majority of agencies. These services were not co-ordinated at a local level and there appeared to be no secondary agency which could provide specialist advice to local or non-specialist agencies (SCC, 1999).

In relation to accessing information from other agencies, few parents were aware of national helplines such as Parentline, and they found that often agencies were inaccessible due to opening hours, language, the need for computer access, the desire for parents to have anonymity or fear of repercussions for their children if they speak up (SCC, 2002a).

**Access**

Parents, children and young people should be able to access the educational services they need or want.

While the importance of ensuring access to education is difficult to disagree with, it can mean considerably different things to different people in different contexts. It is therefore worth expanding on what we mean by this term. We have, in our work on access to health services, used Hulka’s² definition of access which splits it into three elements:

- **Accessibility** – do obstacles exist to limit the physical accessibility of services such as geography, transport and cost?
- **Availability** – do obstacles exist that make it difficult to gain access to existing services such as opening hours and appointment times?
- **Acceptability** – do obstacles exist that limit use of existing services as they fail to meet people’s needs such as difficulties with communication, language barriers and concerns about privacy and confidentiality?

In our research and policy, SCC has explored the accessibility of schools in rural areas. Parents in rural areas found that there was very limited or no choice since there was usually only one secondary school for the area. Where there was a choice of another school, transport became an issue as transport would only be provided to the catchment area school and parents would have to organise and fund transport to another school. This effectively ruled it the option out for many (SCC, 2002b).

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In relation to the accessibility of the curriculum, the majority of parents were happy with the range of subjects that their children were able to access, with 90% saying that it was either very good or fairly good. Only 3% said that the range on offer was fairly poor or very poor (SCC, 2002a). While overall, parents were happy with the balance between vocational and academic subjects, parents from disadvantaged backgrounds would like their children to be able to access ‘alternative curricula’ with more emphasis on vocational skills than academic subjects (SCC, 2002b).

While physical accessibility of schools was not seen as a problem, the accessibility of a range of allied services was seen as limited by parents. In particular, parents would like their children to be able to access other services, such as extra curricular activities and homework clubs. Similarly, they would like to be able to access services such as advocacy which were seen as less readily available (SCC, 2002a).

In terms of availability, SCC has explored how available and approachable school staff are to parents. When asked whether or not they would use services designed to increase availability, the majority of parents responded positively (see chart 2).

![Chart 2: Likelihood of using services to improve parents access to schools (n = 1007)](chart)

Parents, therefore, would broadly welcome initiatives that would increase the availability of teachers and school staff.

The survey carried out in 2002 does not provide information on the acceptability of services, our evidence base here comes from the focus groups carried out with disadvantaged parents as part of the national education debate, again in 2002. Parents who were living on very low incomes described feeling discriminated against, because of the stigma attached to parents from low incomes, and lone parents in particular. They felt that this affected their relationship with individual teachers and the school as a whole. Similarly, they spoke of feeling excluded by the professional language and jargon of the teaching staff (SCC, 2002b).

### Redress

Parents, children and young people should have ways of seeking redress when things go wrong.

Access to methods of seeking redress is a key principle of consumer rights, consumers must be able to challenge services when the go wrong and ensure that in the future the situation is rectified.

The issue of redress in education is less straightforward than in other cases of consumer protection. Often it is not possible for the mistake to be rectified, for example, when a child fails to be diagnosed with dyslexia, additional support may be of assistance in improving their academic achievement, but they are unable to be given back the years of lost opportunity. Similarly, monetary compensation is rare in education law, with reparation focusing instead on the provision of necessary services and on assurances that in future policies of schools or local authorities will be changed to limit the chance of the same problem occurring again.

The focus of SCC policy and research to date has therefore been the existence and accessibility of complaints procedures rather than the outcome. Within the school education system, our research found that almost a quarter of all parents had complained to the school at some point, though only 2% had taken their complaint to the local authority. A sizeable minority of parents (28%) who had complained were not satisfied with the response from the school (SCC, 2002a). Parents from disadvantaged communities were less likely to complain that those from professional backgrounds.

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3 For the purposes of this research, parents were defined as disadvantaged if they lived in a geographically remote area, were a member of a minority ethnic community or were living on low incomes.
Chart 3 shows who parents would contact if they were unhappy with how a school was dealing with an issue relating to the education or events at their child’s school. Almost a quarter of parents said that they did not know who to contact with a complaint or concern, suggesting low awareness of methods of seeking redress.

Chart 3: Who parents would contact if unhappy with how a school is dealing with an issue (n = 1007)

- Don’t know: 22%
- Other: 5%
- Scottish Executive: 5%
- Public Services Ombudsman: 5%
- Senior school staff: 5%
- Council Education Department: 10%
- Councillor: 12%
- Member of school board: 23%
- MP or other elected representative: 25%

Qualitative research found that parents were also concerned about the ramifications for their children of complaining to a higher body on their child’s education and were aware of the unequal relationship between themselves as parents and schools who could exert power and make it difficult for them to challenge the school (SCC, 2002b).

In relation to home education, we found that none of the leaflets given to parents interested in or already providing home education gave information on how to complain about the local authorities involvement in their decision to educate their child at home. Where complaints and monitoring mechanisms did exist these were of a poor standard (SCC, 2000).

Most respondents were either very satisfied (28%) or fairly satisfied (57%) with the way school bodies represent their views, though 10% did not know how satisfied they were suggesting poor communication in some schools (SCC, 2002a).

Echoing the concerns raised in the Banks Review of School Boards, SCC research found a correlation between parental qualifications and membership of a school body with 16% of parents who had a higher education qualification being involved compared to only 3% of those with no educational qualifications. We therefore remain concerned about the ability of these organisations to represent all parents at a school level (SCC, 2002a).

A considerable amount of work has already been carried out into home school links, both by SCC and other organisations such as the Scottish School Boards Association and the Scottish Parent Teacher Council.

Representation

Parents, children and young people should be able to shape educational services to their needs.

The SCC has been a vocal advocate of increasing parental representation and involvement in education. As choice in education can be limited for the reasons described above, the ability of consumers to shape education policies to their needs is crucial.

We make a clear distinction between:

- home school partnership (including the role of school boards);
Parental involvement in their child’s learning and within the school itself is now widely regarded as beneficial to individual families, schools and the wider community.

However, much less policy development has surrounded the area of parental representation in policy making at a national level. We have found that almost half of parents (49%) felt that their views were not adequately reflected at a national level, with those with professional qualifications, those whose children attend private schools and those who are involved in school bodies more critical than others of the level of representation (SCC, 2002a).

Parents in Scotland have a small number of mechanisms for their voices to be heard at a national level, for example through membership of the Scottish Parent Teacher Council, the Scottish School Board Association or the General Teaching Council. However, there is no body that exists only to present the views of parents at a national policy level as each of the three bodies mentioned above have significant levels of teacher membership. Similarly, it is likely that the concerns about representation of school boards and parent teacher associations are replicated at a national level. The SCC believes that an independent, research based body is necessary to represent the interests of all parents, along side other powerful interest groups, such as teachers and local authorities, in education.

**Conclusion**

One of the great benefits of a consumer approach to education is that it places the consumers (parents, children and young people) at the forefront of policy making.

The research findings presented here highlight the variation in parents experiences of the education system, the survey research in particular highlights the fact that the attitudes and experiences of parent are closely liked to educational attainment and social class. Parents with low educational attainment and parents living on low incomes were less likely than other parents to:

- have attended a parents’ evening;
- be a member of a school body;
- feel informed about the education system;
- have made a complaint to the school and;
- know if their child's school had been inspected.

A commitment to ensuring that parents are empowered as consumers of education must therefore have a double aim: to increase empowerment overall, and also to reduce the correlation between lower levels of involvement and social or educational disadvantage.

Many of the issues facing parents as consumers of education such as lack of information, poor complaints systems and limited choice, are exacerbated by the lack of national representation. Weak parental representation has meant these issues have not been considered national priorities, while the concerns of local authorities and teachers unions have been increasingly addressed. As a first step to improving the consumer rights of parents, we believe there is an urgent need for a representative body for parents, with a strong research element to gather the views of all parents, not just those who are members of PTAs and School Boards.

**References to SCC publications**


Parents Views of and Involvement with the Scottish Education System, 2002b, Report of findings of focus groups with parents carried out as part of the National Debate on Education.

Where do they go for advice? A pilot study of parents views and experiences of independent
KEY STATISTICS (Parents As Consumers Of Education, 2002)

Of the parents surveyed:

• 96% were satisfied or very satisfied with the education their child is receiving.

• 23% had made a complaint to the school, only 2% had complained to the Local Authority.

• 45% said they knew little or nothing about helping their child with subject choices.

• 81% were satisfied with the balance of the curriculum.

• 14% were concerned about their child’s safety in school.

• 21% would like to be more involved in their child’s education.

• 83% felt that schools and parents share equally the lead role in ensuring that children receive a good education.

• 9% were involved in some form of school body.

• 49% of parents felt that their views were not adequately reflected in national level policy discussions.

THE SCOTTISH CONSUMER COUNCIL

The SCC was set up in 1975 to promote the interests of Scottish consumers, with a particular regard to those who experience disadvantage in society. Over almost 30 years, we have taken an active role in education policy, conducting research and working closely with other bodies and government agencies to ensure that the voice of parents (and more recently children and young people) as consumers of education is heard.

For more information on what we are doing visit our website at www.scotconsumer.org.uk which gives free access to all our reports, campaigns and policy work. SCC reports in printed formats are available from our offices at the address below. We are often able to make our publications available in alternative formats. Please contact us for details.

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