The National Parents’ Forum
Options for the establishment for a new national parents’ body

February 2006

This paper discusses the options for the establishment of a National Parents’ Forum, to support and develop the proposed Parent Councils and to represent parents at national level.

It recommends that:

• A working group be convened with the Scottish Executive acting as secretariat and an independent chair, to further consider the funding and organisational options for a National Parents’ Forum.
• The Scottish Executive establish a National Parents’ Forum to promote parental involvement and representation in education, based on the recommendations of the working group.

Background

1. The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) believes that parents and their children should be at the heart of the education system. It is an often-ignored fact that it is parents who are legally responsible for ensuring that their children receive ‘adequate and efficient’ education. Current developments in the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Bill provide parents with a mechanism to have their views listened to within their children’s school, but we should go further – parents should be the driving force behind change in the education system.

2. We have advocated for a new national parents’ body since 1999. The consultation on the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Bill has brought this issue to the fore and has led to discussions about how parents are represented in national debates about education. The difficulty experienced by the Scottish Executive in accessing views on the proposals from parents who are not members of a School Board or actively involved in a Parent Teacher Association is just one example of the lack of proper representation for the majority of parents in the education system. SCC believes that a National Parents’ Forum would be a powerful mechanism for holding service providers to account.
3. Given the high level of interest in the issue expressed by organisations and the Scottish Executive, SCC has produced this paper to provide an exploration of the role, remit, funding, staffing and structures of a National Parents’ Forum. In preparing this paper, we spoke to representatives of the Scottish School Board Association (SSBA), the Scottish Parent Teacher Council (SPTC) and Children in Scotland. We also spoke to a parents’ organisation, Sensorium, based in Aberdeen. Each organisation was also given the opportunity to comment on a draft of this paper.

4. Each of the organisations we spoke to recognised the need for a National Parents’ Forum, particularly in light of the changes to school-based parental involvement and representation; however, there were differences in approach to the structure of the proposed body.

Rationale

5. SCC believes that there are a number of reasons why parents should be represented in the education system:
   - It **improves the quality of the decisions** made by professionals, by contributing different ideas, expertise and diversity of experience.
   - It **improves standards** by making sure that services are built around consumers’ needs.
   - It **balances professional and provider interests**. Parental representation in policy discussions, whether at school, local authority or national level is an essential counterweight to the interests of service providers.
   - It **builds trust** and confidence in services and increases user satisfaction. It also mitigates against the negative impact of failures.

6. As things stand, parents themselves do not feel well represented at national level. A Scottish Consumer Council survey of secondary school parents found that almost half of those parents (49%) felt that their views were not adequately reflected at a national level.\(^1\) Compared to the well-organised and articulate teacher bodies that take the lead in policy discussion on education, parents are poorly represented. Many organisations exist to represent professionals’ and providers’ views including: the Association of Directors of Education; COSLA; the Association of Head Teachers in Scotland; the Educational Institute of Scotland; the General Teaching Council; the Headteachers’ Association of Scotland; and the Scottish Secondary Teachers’ Association.

7. There are a range of organisations with an interest in parents and the education system, such as Parenting Across Scotland and the Scottish Network for Parental Involvement in Children’s Learning but these organisations focus on **parenting support** rather than representing parents – this is an important distinction. Improving parenting skills and providing parenting support is not the same as representing the parental interest in education.

8. The two organisations that do exist to represent parents in Scotland are both membership organisations. SPTC and SSBA are made up of members from Parent Teacher Associations and School Boards respectively. While both aim to represent all parents, their membership and accountability comes from school-based bodies.

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\(^1\) Parents as Consumers of Education (SCC, 2002)
9. Both the SPTC and SSBA offer support to school-level parents’ bodies. The SPTC report that their telephone helpline seeks to offer help and advice on any issue affecting their members and will respond to any request whether the parent or teacher is a member or not. The most common topic for enquiry recently has been police checks but they also receive questions on topics such as insurance, use of bouncy castles, and the role of the PTA chairperson.

10. The SPTC represents parents on a number of Scottish Executive and other working groups, including the Scottish Executive Curriculum Review Group, the Learning and Teaching Scotland Advisory Group, the National Qualifications Steering Group, the Scottish Qualifications Authority Board and Advisory Committee, and the Scottish Network for Parental Involvement in Children’s Learning.

11. Both the SPTC and the SSBA are small organisations (see table 1). We have concerns about the capacity of SSBA and SPTC to represent the views of the wider parent population. This is not meant to be a criticism of the organisations: both clearly aim to represent the wider parent interest, however they do so without adequate funding. In 2003, the total income generated by the SSBA was mostly raised via membership fees from local School Boards, which cannot be increased due to the small budgets available to School Boards themselves. Though the SSBA provides invaluable training and support to School Boards, their total income is less than 6% of the £1.5m that education authorities report as the costs of the School Board system.

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<th>Table 1: Staffing and funding of SSBA and SPTC</th>
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<tr>
<td>Scottish School Boards Association</td>
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<td>Staff</td>
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<td>Funding</td>
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12. Neither organisation can afford to employ research staff, nor to regularly commission research on the views of parents who are not members of a PTA or School Board. Aside from consultation exercises with their own members, neither has produced research on parents’ views and experiences of the education system. This calls into question their capacity to represent the 90% of parents who report that they are not members of either a PTA or School Board, without considerable additional funding.

13. Neither the SSBA nor the SPTC receive funding from the Scottish Executive. In contrast, the Scottish Health Council, which aims to promote improvements in the quality and extent of patient focus and public involvement in the health services has a budget of £2.1 million. As a relevant comparison on staffing, the Scottish Health Council employs 51 staff: 5 in their central office, 3 Regional Managers and 43 staff working through local offices.
14. Turning to the changes to be introduced through the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Bill, the proposals significantly affect the national representation of parents:
- The Bill plans to abolish School Boards and, by association, their national organisation the SSBA. The implications for SSBA do not appear to have been considered by the Scottish Executive, whose financial memorandum to the Bill notes that ‘the Bill has no direct cost impact on other bodies’. On the contrary, it has profound implications for the future of SSBA which will no longer have funding through School Board membership fees.
- If the SSBA no longer exists, it is unclear what organisation would support and advise the new Parent Councils or represent their views at national level. SPTC could carry out such a role, complementary to their work with Parent Teacher Associations and Parent Associations, but this would be a significant change to their current work load and organisational structure.
- Research carried out by SCC found that parents themselves identified the need for Parent Forums/Councils to have independent support.²

15. **SCC believes that the combination of low levels of funding for national representation for parents and the current proposals make the development of a new National Parents’ Forum a matter of urgency. The debate is no longer an academic one; without support from the Scottish Executive, it is questionable whether any national organisation will exist to support the school-level changes.**

**Aims and Functions**

16. The fundamental purpose of the National Parents’ Forum should be to promote parental involvement and representation in education.

17. To do this it would require the following interconnected aims:
- Providing independent support to Parent Councils.
- Providing expert advice and information on parental involvement and representation.
- Providing evidence on parents’ experience of and views about the education system.
- Monitoring the implementation of the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Bill.

18. **Provide independent support to Parent Councils**

The National Parents’ Forum would support the development of Parent Councils by:
- Producing information such as toolkits and model constitutions to assist Parent Councils and providing guidance on communicating and consulting with the wider Parent Forum.
- Providing training to ensure that Parent Council members are equipped to carry out their role.
- Providing local support through regional staff to work intensively with individual schools as they set up and develop Parent Councils and Parent Forums.
- Providing mechanisms to share practice and facilitating communication between Parent Councils through conferences, seminars and e-communication.

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² Making the Difference: Research on parents’ views of Scottish Executive proposals to improve parental involvement and representation in schools (SCC, 2005)
19. **Provide expert advice and information on parental involvement and representation**  
The National Parents’ Forum will provide expert advice and information on parental involvement and representation by:
- Working in partnership with other organisations at national level, such as Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education, Learning and Teaching Scotland, and the Scottish Executive.
- Working closely with education authorities to ensure that they have the best possible information and advice on developing parental involvement and representation.
- Holding the historic memory of the field, providing a context and background for policy development.

20. **Provide evidence on parents’ experience of, and views about, the education system**  
The National Parents’ Forum would provide evidence on parents’ experiences of, and views about, the education system to improve standards in education overall by:
- Ensuring that parents’ interests are identified correctly and their needs addressed in the right way.
- Insuring against unintended and counter-productive consequences for parents or their children of any intervention.
- Ensuring credibility with partners at policy-making level including government.
- Reassuring education providers that they are meeting the needs of parents and children.  

21. **Monitoring the implementation of the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Bill**  
The National Parents’ Forum would monitor the implementation of the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Bill by:
- Providing evidence on the quality and extent of parental involvement and representation through robust research with both Parent Forums and Parent Councils.
- Supporting the work of HMIe in developing indicators on parental involvement for How Good is Our School and expert advice on the inspection process.
- Reporting to parents by publishing an annual review of progress on parental involvement and representation.

22. Children in Scotland suggest that the role is widened to include early years services and other services that parents use such as social care health and leisure services. This would be in line with the Scottish Executive policy of integrated services and joined up policies.

23. **Further consideration is required on the following issue:**
   a. Should the role of the National Parents’ Forum cover only educational issues or should it be widened to include other areas where parents have an interest?

**Principles**

24. The National Consumer Council publication ‘Visible, Accountable and Achieving’ highlights the key principles that people expect from consumer representation organisations. The National Parents’ Forum should be led by the guiding principles of being:
- **In touch** with parents;
- **Transparent** and accountable;
- **Representative** of parents – with a specific duty to represent disadvantaged parents;
- **Effective** – well informed and based on robust research; and
- **Independent** from the industry, the regulator and the government.

These principles significantly impact on the structure of the proposed National Parents’ Forum.

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Structure
25. The most contentious area of discussion surrounded the structure of a new National Parents’ Forum, with concerns raised surrounding membership and accountability. This section considers the organisational options, governance and accountability issues, staffing and funding.

Organisational type
26. We have identified three possible organisational types for the establishment of the National Parents’ Forum:
- A stand-alone voluntary organisation taking membership from Parent Councils.
- A project based within an existing organisation, which could be either a voluntary organisation or an NDPB. The project could be based around membership from school-based bodies.
- A non-departmental public body (NDPB) set up and funded by the Scottish Executive.

The opportunities and threats posed by each option are outlined in table 2.

Table 2: Opportunities and Threats

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<tr>
<th>Organisation Type</th>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Threats</th>
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<tr>
<td>A stand-alone voluntary organisation</td>
<td>- Clear ownership by and accountability to membership.</td>
<td>- Limited ability to raise funds through need for low membership fees.</td>
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<td>- Rent rebates and other grants and benefits available to charitable organisations.</td>
<td>- Could be perceived as ‘outside’ the system, rather than a key player.</td>
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<td>- Could be developed out of existing voluntary organisations.</td>
<td>- Could be ‘captured’ by small number of elected parents rather than focusing on needs of all parents.</td>
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<td>A project based within an existing organisation</td>
<td>- Minimal ‘teething’ problems with management and administration in place.</td>
<td>- Depending on the body the project was placed in, it could be viewed as lacking independence.</td>
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<td>- Established networks.</td>
<td>- Lack of ownership by parents.</td>
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<td>- Lower start-up costs.</td>
<td>- Governing arrangements dependent on the host organisation.</td>
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<td>A newly created NDPB</td>
<td>- Stability provided by government funding.</td>
<td>- Perception of lack of independence from Scottish Executive as governing body would be appointed.</td>
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<td>- Viewed as an ‘insider’.</td>
<td>- Contrary to current Scottish Executive policy of reducing NDPBs.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Close to decision makers.</td>
<td>- ‘Teething’ problems of a new body.</td>
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27. Though SCC is itself an NDPB, following consideration, we are not now convinced that this would be the best method of establishing a National Parents’ Forum. The Scottish Executive is committed to reducing the number of Scottish NDPBs and a governing body of appointed members is not likely to include active Parent Council members and may therefore be perceived as remote and disconnected from school level Parent Councils.

28. The remainder of this paper therefore considers two models for the body:
   - Model 1: A stand-alone voluntary organisation
   - Model 2: A project based within an existing organisation

**Governance and Accountability**

29. Whichever model is selected, the National Parents’ Forum will require a governing body. The National Parents’ Forum should conform to the Good Governance Standard for Public Services (Office for Public Management Ltd/CIPFA, 2004) by:
   - Focusing on the organisation’s purpose and on outcomes for citizens and service users.
   - Performing effectively in clearly defined functions and roles.
   - Promoting values for the whole organisation and demonstrating the values of good governance through behaviour.
   - Taking informed, transparent decisions and managing risk.
   - Developing the capacity and capability of the governing body to be effective.
   - Engaging stakeholders and making accountability real.

30. To ensure good governance, members of the governing body should also be expected to adhere to the Nolan Principles of Public Life (selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership).

31. The two organisational models for setting up the National Parents’ Forum suggest different governance arrangements (see table 3).

**Table 3: Organisational type and likely governance arrangements**

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<tr>
<th>Governance Arrangement</th>
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<td><strong>Model 1: A stand-alone voluntary organisation</strong> Members elected from the Parent Council members that fund the organisation through fees.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Model 2: A project based within an existing organisation</strong> Dependent on the host organisation's governing arrangements, though the National Parents’ Forum project would be likely to have an Advisory Group.</td>
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32. In discussions, both SPTC and SSBA expressed a clear desire for the National Parents' Forum’s governing body to be elected from members, suggesting a voluntary organisation approach similar to each organisation’s current structure. However, SCC feels that focusing heavily on accountability from elections at national level is at odds with the removal of elections at school level.
33. The governance arrangements for a project based within an existing organisation would depend on the governance of the host organisation. The project itself would be likely to be managed by an advisory group who may be invited or elected. However, the advisory group would not have the same managerial and leadership role of a Board; its chief role would be to advise and steer the Forum.

34. Regardless of the model selected, the governing body should include members from other national organisations and experts in the field of parental involvement and representation. External views and expertise could be helpful to the development of the National Parents’ Forum.

35. It would be expected that there would be between 10 and 15 members of the National Parents’ Forum Board or the Advisory Group. SCC would expect reasonable expenses to be paid to them, including childcare for parent members. We would also like to suggest, given the time commitment from parent members’ that a small level of remuneration be paid to them to encourage parents who might not otherwise be interested to participate.

36. Further consideration is required on the following issues:
   a. How should the governing body be appointed? Are elections from Parent Councils the most appropriate method of appointing national representatives?
   b. Which organisations, other than parents, should be represented on the governing body?
   c. Are there other mechanisms for holding the governing body to account that should be included in the structure?
   d. What would be the impact of the two models on the perceived accountability and ownership from parents?
   e. What support should be provided to members of the governing body?

Staffing

37. During the discussions that formed the basis of this paper, both the SPTC and SSBA were clear that the legitimacy of a National Parents’ Forum would rest in close connections between the National Parents’ Forum and the school-based Parent Councils and Forums.

38. The structure outlined here gives the National Parents’ Forum a local and national presence. Nationally, the organisation would have a headquarters and a core staff team, supplemented by Regional Development Officers. We have not suggested an optimum amount of local offices as this depends largely on the financial support available but would not envision a Regional Development Officer for each local authority area.

Chart 1: Proposed National Parents’ Forum Structure
39. The arrows in the chart flow in both directions, to highlight the importance of providing information to Parent Forums and Parent Councils and listening to their views and experiences. This is particularly important for developing and sharing good practice.

40. The functions and structure outlined in this paper suggest a number of key staff would be required to ensure that the National Parents’ Forum would be able to meet its aims:
   - A Director.
   - Regional Staff to provide information and advice to Parent Councils and outreach support during their establishment and during times of change.
   - Research and Policy Development to conduct research, produce publications, develop good practice, and provide representatives to Scottish Executive and other working groups.
   - Practice Development to provide training courses to Parent Council members.
   - Administrative and support staff.

41. During discussions with SPTC and SSBA the optimum size of the National Parents’ Forum was considered. SSBA felt that some of these roles, particularly research, could be bought in rather than having core staff in place. It should be noted though that contracting research organisations could be more expensive than hiring internal staff. Contract staff would also hinder the ability of the organisation to build expertise in research and consultation with parents.

42. Further consideration is required on the following issues:
   a. Should the National Parents’ Forum employ Regional Development Officers, and if so, what is the optimum number and geographical location for these employees?
   b. What is the optimum number of staff required to carry out the functions of the National Parents’ Forum?
   c. Are there any services (for example, research or training) that should be ‘bought in’ rather than carried out by core staff?

Funding

43. In our recent discussion paper we highlighted the funding options for a National Parents’ Forum:
   - Membership fees: from school-level Parent Councils.
   - Self-generated income: from publications, training and events and by applying for grants from private companies.
   - Public sector funding: from the Scottish Executive.

44. Each of these options would be open to both a stand-alone voluntary organisation (model 1) and a project based within an existing organisation (model 2). Taken individually, none of these options is likely to provide the funds required to create an effective policy and research organisation.

45. Both the SPTC and the SSBA highlighted the importance of keeping membership fees low to allow them to be absorbed within tight budgets and are therefore unlikely to raise the funds necessary to carry out the roles identified. Self-generated income would also be difficult to sustain over long periods of time and would be dependent on the economy as a whole; it would most likely fund specific projects rather than core costs of the organisation. An effective National Parents’ Forum is only possible with Scottish Executive funding.

5 Representing and Involving Parents: A discussion paper (SCC, 2005)
46. The funding depends entirely on the level of support that the Scottish Executive envisions providing. However, assuming a total staff of 10 (5 in the national office and 5 Regional Development Officers) and the need for a substantial research and training budget, we would suggest an indicative figure of around £550,000.

47. **Further consideration is required on the following issues:**
   a. *What level of funds could be reasonably expected to be raised from membership fees?*
   b. *What additional funding could be reasonably expected to be raised from self-generated income?*
   c. *What core funding would be required from the Scottish Executive to create an effective National Parents' Forum?*
   d. *Would the organisational model selected impact on the funding available from these three areas?*
   e. *What additional ‘start-up’ costs would there be?*

**Timing and transitions**

48. There are three options for the timetabling of the establishment of a National Parents’ Forum:
   - establish in advance of the implementation of the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Bill (prior to the transitional school year of 2006/07);
   - allow a significant gap in time to allow for the ‘bottom up’ developments at national level and review the situation once the proposed changes are implemented; or
   - provide for transitional arrangements for 2006/07 with the full National Parents’ Forum to be established for 2007/08.

49. Establishing the National Parents’ Forum in advance of the implementation of the Bill would ensure that Parent Councils were supported during their initial phase. However, parents may not feel that they have adequate ownership of a body set up without their input. It would also not be possible to raise funds or elect members from Parent Councils prior to their creation or during the proposed transitional year of 2006/07. This option would raise questions over ownership and accountability.

50. However, leaving a significant gap to allow for the organic development of a new national body would not protect parents’ right to be represented at national level during this important phase. The financial memorandum to the Bill suggests that the new system will begin in 2007/08; waiting for a significant gap could mean the National Parents’ Forum would not be in existence until 2009/10. Such a significant gap between the commencement of the Act and the establishment of a new body would raise questions over the status of the SSBA and may leave a gap in support to school-level bodies during the transition from School Boards to Parent Councils. The existence of the SSBA, established by a group of parents in 1991, is a clear indication that a national body is needed to support school-based parent representative bodies.

51. As a ‘third way’, SCC suggests that work on the National Parents’ Forum begins as soon as possible and that transitional arrangements are made during 2006/07, mirroring the timetable for transition at school level. A transitional steering group could be established for the first year of the National Parents’ Forum (to coincide with the transitional year at school-level) to provide support to emerging Parent Councils and to put in place structures to secure a clear relationship between the national body and Parent Councils.
52. A final issue that arose during discussions on the principles of a National Parents’ Forum, was whether or not individual parents should be consulted on the organisational structure of the body. No consensus was achieved on this matter but SCC suggest that the working group could consider this in more detail.

53. **Further issues requiring consideration include:**
   a. Should the National Parents’ Forum be established to coincide with the transitional year (2006/07)?
   b. What arrangements are required for a transitional governing body?
   c. At what point should a transitional governing body be expected to hand over to the full governing structure?
   d. Does the organisational model chosen have an impact on timing and transitions?
   e. Should parents be consulted about the organisational structure and functions of the National Parents’ Forum?

**Conclusion**

54. Following our discussions, SCC believes that there is now a momentum behind the development of a National Parents’ Forum with key organisations in the field agreeing that it is a necessary step forward. However, the issues surrounding organisational type, governance, staffing and funding require further consideration. SCC recommends that: a working group be convened with an independent chair, the Scottish Executive acting as secretariat, and including representatives of SPTC, SSBA and other interested organisations. This working group should be tasked with building consensus on the outstanding issues and report to the Minister on the proposals for a National Parents’ Forum.

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**The Scottish Consumer Council**

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