This paper summarises findings of research carried out to explore parents’ views of the Scottish Executive proposals contained within the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Bill.

**Research Methodology**

The research was carried out in two phases:

1. MORI Scotland was contracted to carry out telephone interviews with a random sample of 1,000 parents of children aged 5-16, in state education, across Scotland. The parents were selected using random-digit dialing to ensure that all households, including those with ex-directory numbers, could be sampled. Results were analysed using SPSS and only statistically significant relationships have been reported.

2. Eight focus groups were carried out with a total of 39 parents to explore their views in-depth. Two groups of parents were approached to participate in the focus groups: those who could be described as experiencing disadvantage due to poverty or low levels of education (Groups 1 – 4); and those whose children attend schools where there is no School Board (Groups 5 – 8). None of the parents involved in the focus groups were members of School Boards.

Both the focus groups and the telephone interviews followed the same structure: parents were first asked about their own levels of involvement, then asked to comment on current structures for representing their views before turning to the Scottish Executive proposals.

**Current levels of involvement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• 69% of parents had not been involved in any kind of activity at their child’s school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 79% of parents felt that the balance of opportunities to be involved in the life of their child’s school is about right but 18% stated that there are currently too few opportunities to get involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 45% of parents reported that they would like to be more involved in the life of the school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The telephone survey found that a large majority of parents had not been involved in school activities, and many (45%) reported that they would want to be more involved in the life of their child’s school. Reasons given for lack of involvement were a combination of lack of opportunities presented to them by the school and difficulties in finding time due to work or family commitments. This suggests that involving more parents in the life of their child’s school would depend on both actions by the school (such as more communication, being asked, and more activities) and better work-life balance to increase the amount of time available to parents to take part.
Views on Current Representative Structures

Key statistics
- 87% of parents responded that their child’s school has a School Board but only 2% of parents are members of the School Board.
- 87% of parents responded that they had never considered standing for election to the School Board.
- 45% of parents did not join the School Board because they did not feel that they had the time to volunteer. Only 10% of parents did not join because they did not want to, the remaining 45% gave a range of practical obstacles to their membership of the School Board, such as lack of childcare (5%) and meeting times (8%).
- While the majority of parents reported satisfaction with the way that the School Board represented their views, 14% responded that they did not know what the School Board says.
- Only 18% of parents reported contact with the School Board about their views on matters relating to the school.
- A third of parents did not know how to contact the School Board.

Few parents were members of parent bodies at their children’s schools (2% were School Board members and 8% were members of a PTA committee). Members of one parent body, for example a School Board, were also more likely to be members of a second parent body, for example a PTA.

Throughout the focus groups, parents asked the researchers questions about School Boards, expressing confusion about their role. This was often explicitly linked to a lack of information from the School Board, reinforced by the telephone survey findings that only 18% of parents had been in touch with a School Board about their views on matters relating to the school.

Focus groups reported concerns with the accessibility of both PTAs and School Boards, particularly in relation to the perceived socio-economic status of parent body members compared to ‘normal’ parents:

*You see that with the School Board over at my daughter’s secondary school. Nearly every one of them works in the University, to a person they are all Dr this and Mrs that’* (Parent, Group 6: Urban primary)

In a few cases, this was also linked to the behaviour of their children, rather than just their own situation:

*I always feel as well that people who are on these boards, their kids are like, the perfect kids. Their kids are not like my kids.* (Parent, Group 2: Semi-urban secondary)

The overall feeling within the focus groups was that School Boards are perceived to be ‘higher’ bodies, dealing with complicated matters and not accessible to ‘normal’ parents.
Scottish Executive Proposals for Parent Forums

Key findings

- 97% of parents agreed that the Parent Forum should consult other parents in the school about important issues and pass their views on to education authorities, head teachers and other relevant parties.
- 96% of parents agreed that there should be a body to represent parents’ views in their child’s school.
- 84% of parents felt that community groups should be involved in the Parent Forum, if invited to attend by the parents.
- 83% agreed that parents should be allowed to decide how the Parent Forum in their school is organised.
- 81% of parents felt that the parents who took part in the Parent Forum should be elected.
- 79% agreed that parents should decide what should be discussed at Parent Forum meetings.
- 63% of parents felt that they would be more likely to get involved in a Parent Forum if there were more parents involved than is currently the case with School Boards.
- 48% of parents felt that they would be more likely to get involved in the Parent Forum if it had a say over the school budget.

Flexibility and support

Parents who took part in the telephone survey and the focus groups approved of the Scottish Executive proposals to allow parents more flexibility to decide how to run Parent Forums within their own schools. In the focus groups, parents were clear that they felt each school was different and may require different structures:

*I think it should be different because all schools are different. Like I think it would be different from a town to a village.* (Parent, Group 7: Semi-urban primary)

During the focus group discussions parents requested guidelines or models from the Scottish Executive to facilitate the development of a forum at their school:

*Not unless the government put out a framework or guidelines on how they should do it and then leave it up to the school and parents how they are going to do it, a wee bit help from the government.* (Parent, Group 2: Semi-urban secondary)

Parents in the focus groups also requested training and childcare facilities to support them in becoming members of a Parent Forum. The idea of being able to share good practice between Parent Forums was mentioned by a number of parents in the focus groups:

*I mean that’s the thing, if it falls by the wayside then you turn round and say I need some help here, this strategy is not working for us, have you got any other examples, have you got any other systems that are working better in other areas, can you help?* (Parent, Group 1: Rural primary)
Composition of Parent Forums
The telephone survey suggested that parents felt that head teachers should be present at Parent Forum meetings: 50% of parents felt that the head teacher should always be in attendance and a further 48% felt that the head teacher should be in attendance when invited. During focus group discussions, parents gave a number of reasons for teacher involvement including that it would help parents understand school issues and that it would foster better communication between parents and teachers in general. However, some parents also highlighted the possibility that the head teacher could exert undue influence on the Parent Forum and would prefer them to attend only when invited:

*They would only discuss the topics that they [the head teacher] really wanted to talk about.* (Parent, Group 3: Urban primary)

Previous functions of School Boards
During the focus groups, parents were asked about their opinions on the School Board functions that are not currently contained within the draft Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Bill. In relation to powers over occasional holidays and school spending on books and materials, few parents expressed an interest in having control over this issue. However, they did express a desire to be consulted by the head teacher:

*It would be good to be kept informed of what they are doing, what they are buying and what not. I think the head teacher should get the last say but I think the parents should be involved with talking about it as well. We just want involved eh!* (Parent, Group 3: Urban primary)

Raising awareness
During the focus group discussions, parents suggested that the Scottish Executive take a proactive approach to raising awareness of Parent Forums:

*We should be doing things on television...the people don’t read newspapers, they don’t read the letters cause they can’t read, having it visually like adverts, this is what parents are watching and it’s explaining their rights and really, really user friendly.* (Parent, Group 6: Urban primary)

They felt that if informed of the changes, parents would be likely to get involved in their school’s Parent Forum.