

61472 Membership of Research Access Stakeholders Group (RASG).

What is the membership of the group and how were members selected?

The group is a sub-group to the Digital Reference Group for Parents and Carers which improves engagement with parents around the City of Edinburgh Council's Edinburgh Learns Digital Strategy (including Empowered Learning). Martin Gemmell chairs the group as the Principal Educational Psychologist. Three parents who have detailed understanding of the importance of research and issues relating to research in schools are also members of the group. The group also has a Professor from Moray House who volunteered and the Research Assistant who works for CEC. The Group also met with two other Professors at Moray House to discuss ethical matters.

What is the Terms of Reference for the group and what governance structures are in place to ensure compliance with CEC policies?

There is no statutory obligation for CEC to provide access to any individual researcher or project to children or employees under their establishment. CEC recognises the value of research to CEC and wider society that can be brought from proportionate access and has to balance this with their statutory obligations which also take children away from the primary purpose of education.

The group has a TOR which is summarised here as "Considering research within CEC schools or Early Years centres where researchers wish to conduct research directly with children". The group does not make any decisions. All decisions and authority remain with the Principal Educational Psychologist who will consult with other senior council officers when required. The group is purely advisory and is only asked to comment on some proposals. For example, where there may be lack of clarity or potential impacts for some parents and children, where the research may not be expected as a typical class time activity, or if it involves sensitive areas.

The approach to involving parents aligns with the council's Parent Engagement and Involvement Delivery Plan 2025-2028. This emphasises improved communication and collaboration with parents/carers to build trust and support the best outcomes for children/young people.

What is the basis of the authority on which the parent members of the group act?

The parents act on a consultative and advisory basis, similar to a focus group, for example to assess whether information provided by researchers for parents and children is complete, transparent and likely to be understandable by all groups. Despite receiving ethical approval, this is not always the case for all proposals. For example, sometimes researchers have copied and pasted information in privacy notices that is not relevant to their project, or the concepts of anonymity, confidentiality, data sharing and linkage are not properly explained to parents or children to enable them to make informed decisions. Also, within and between institutions there are varied approaches to the ethics of consent, and little recognition of ethical issues specific to a classroom setting in current times.

What steps did the council take to ensure that this group represents the wider views of parents across Edinburgh and that parents in Edinburgh had equal opportunity to be members of this committee (e.g. through advertisement or competitive process)?

Parents are very diverse and no group can represent all parents or make decisions to consent on behalf of any other parents. This approach seeks to ensure steps are being taken so a parent perspective is considered, and all parents are properly informed and

receive accurate information before their children participate in research and that their children cannot participate without that. Membership of the group (parent and researchers) may change. The original Terms of Reference were for the group to be short lived but then it took longer to document an approach to enable research to continue. Commitment to review the approach was confirmed in the published Q and A along with contact details so anyone could feedback in the interim. Our understanding of the context of this approach is as follows.

In March 2025, the Council paused all research. This followed the legal and ethical issues with the Health and Wellbeing Census which put children at risk of potential harms and did not properly respect the rights of children or parents, for example where inadequate and contradictory information had been provided to parents and children. According to the Scottish Government, this research development involved around 20 stakeholders, including Glasgow University, Public Health Scotland, MRC/CSO Social & Public Health Sciences Unit, Education Institute of Scotland, Association of Headteachers and Deputies in Scotland and ScotCen Social Research. As far as we can ascertain, Parents had not been represented, which may have contributed to the avoidable issues. Exclusion of any parent voice also led to an infringement of the Code of Practice for Statistics. Approaches which do not adequately engage and ensure transparency with parents have been observed more widely in some areas of research with children in schools.

In the absence of a formal policy on research access in schools, the Council's aim was to identify prompt actions to ensure some research could continue as soon as possible, while also complying with their statutory duty to children and young people. The RASG was formed as a subgroup of the Digital Reference Group, which has been promoted to parent council and is open to any parent to join. This has been successful with access for around a dozen projects approved by CEC since then. As explained in 7.2 and 7.3 of the Q and A published on the Council website, feedback on this approach will be gathered from children, teachers, parents and researchers, and the guidance refined as necessary. Part of this will be to define any ongoing role and format of the RASG.

What steps have been taken to consult with teachers on the demand for opt-in research and to consider implications such as administrative burden?

CEC has worked with a number of teachers conducting their own research and these teachers who are particularly aware of the issues are content with an opt-in methodology. CEC is mindful of the potential for administrative burden when research is carried out in schools and would always seek to reduce any such burden on teachers, management and admin staff.

As explained in 7.2 and 7.3 in the Q and A, staff will be invited to feedback on the updated research process, including the opt-in process.

How have young people been involved and have their views been heard?

Young people have been involved in co-creating the research in some projects CEC has approved. In one project, young people are being invited to express their interest in participating, before parents are asked to opt-in.

Young people are required to consent on their own behalf to participate in any research after their parents have provided permission for them to be invited to do so in school hours. A parent cannot require a child to participate. As explained in 7.2 and 7.3 in the Q and A, children will be invited to feedback on the updated research process.

Has a Child Rights Impact Assessment been conducted on the change in policy?

No. There was no previous documented policy which could be changed. The procedure for research access had evolved over time, without parent involvement, unfortunately leading to rights-infringing research being implemented.

The new protocol was created to enable research to continue while preventing repeat infringements of children's and parents' rights. It has been reviewed by the council's legal team.

Researchers are expected to ensure their research will not negatively impact the rights of children and parents.

What training and qualifications do this group hold in relation to research methods, ethics and integrity? What steps have been taken to ensure they are adequately equipped to make decisions on behalf of local government on complex research governance issues?

The group does not make any decisions. The Principal Educational Psychologist makes all decisions, in collaboration with other senior council officers where necessary.

He has been involved in approving research applications for over 15 years. He has lectured to the University of Strathclyde Educational Psychology courses on Research Ethics. He has a number of academic qualifications and has previously had a research background at the University of Edinburgh and the University of Strathclyde.

The Research Assistant has more than four years experience as an RA in CEC and West Lothian Council. In her previous post in WLC she was lead for screening and approving research access requests.

While members are not required to have any experience other than being available to assess if information is clear and complete, current members combine relevant professional and academic experience and are actively committed to ensuring research can continue in schools.

Parents do not require any qualifications or training for the Council to engage with them, as parents are a key stakeholder in education and primarily responsible for their children's education, health and wellbeing. This group is more like a focus group and does not make decisions. Being a parent or part of a Parent Council does not require any qualifications, although some have attended sessions and engaged with Connect training materials.

The Professor from Moray House has the necessary qualifications to conduct research and to hold a position at Moray House.

In terms of steps taken to ensure the group is adequately equipped to take complex decisions.

The group is not making any decisions. The Terms of Reference make this clear. The work of the group has been scrutinised and approved by the City of Edinburgh Council Education Committee.

Link to webpage where you can then access Q and A pdf: [Research access to Edinburgh schools and early years centres – The City of Edinburgh Council](#)