

## Office of Chief Researcher

## Public Attitudes to Participation

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This research, commissioned by the Scottish Executive Office of Chief Researcher, gathered information on public attitudes to, and experiences of, issues related to civic participation. The research was carried out by placing a module of questions in the first wave of MORI's Social Policy Monitor.

### Main Findings

- Few people felt well informed about the work done by political representatives: knowledge of local councillors' work was highest and that of MEPs was lowest.
- The majority of respondents had no contact with any elected representative in the previous year. However, one in eight had contacted a councillor, more than had contacted any other representative.
- A majority of those questioned thought that the government should consult on issues that were part of its manifesto but two thirds also agreed that there is no point in participating because the decisions had already been made.
- The two main barriers to participation were low awareness of opportunities to take part in consultation and scepticism about the value of consultation. The only significant factor that would encourage participation was more information
- Almost 50% of respondents had not heard of any of a number of official mechanisms for disseminating information and consulting on issues. However, the websites of the Scottish Executive and Scottish Parliament were best known.

### Broad Trends

- Respondents in rural areas were more likely to be involved in community or voluntary groups, to be better informed about the work of community representatives and to be interested in receiving Web-based information.
- Younger people were less likely to have been involved in any activity or campaigns aimed at influencing decision-making but they were also less likely to be sceptical about the value of participating and less likely to trust elected representatives to make decisions for them.
- Respondents in more deprived areas tended to be less well informed and less likely to have been involved in any activity. They also felt they would be unlikely to take part in future consultation but were unable to identify any change or support that would encourage them to participate.

## Introduction

This research, commissioned by the Scottish Executive Office of Chief Researcher, gathered information on public attitudes to, and experiences of, issues related to civic participation.

The questions measured the following:

- respondents' knowledge and involvement with various levels of government
- contact with, and participation in, government
- attitudes towards consultation and participation
- factors that might promote involvement
- awareness of various consultation and information mechanisms.

The research was carried out by placing a module of questions in the first wave of MORI's Social Policy Monitor – a multi client survey carried out among a random sample of approximately 1,000 adults across Scotland. Fieldwork took place between January and April 2005.

## Involvement in community activity

Overall, almost half of those interviewed had been actively involved in some form of community activity or volunteering in the previous year. Women (51%) were more likely than men (42%) to have been involved in any organisation. The differences between men and women are largely accounted for by women's higher involvement in children's groups (11% compared with 4% of men), caring organisations (11% compared with 6%) and religious/faith groups (17% compared with 10%).

Respondents in rural areas were more likely to be involved in community and voluntary organisations than those in urban areas (58% compared with 47% in large urban areas).

## Knowledge and views of community representatives

Respondents were asked about their knowledge of the work of various types of community representative including their MP and MSP. Across the five types of representatives asked about, knowledge of what each does was highest for local councillors; 35% of respondents said they knew either 'a lot' or 'a fair amount' about the work of their local councillor.

Awareness of MEPs' work was lowest; only 7% of respondents said they knew a lot or a fair amount about what they do.

Overall, there were several patterns of awareness.

- not much more than one third of respondents said they knew 'a lot' or 'a fair amount' about any of the representatives.
- younger people tended to be less well informed than older people, although the youngest age group was relatively well informed about some types of representative, such as MPs and MSPs where as the oldest respondents, those age 75 years or more, varied substantially in their knowledge of different representatives.
- rural residents were generally better informed than people living in urban areas.
- partly reflecting the urban/rural difference, people in the deprived areas tended to be less well informed than people in other areas.

In the most deprived areas in Scotland a fifth (19%) of respondents were knowledgeable about the work of the MP compared with two fifths (39%) of respondents in the least deprived. This pattern was repeated for most types of representative although for MEPs and community councilors the difference between deprived and non-deprived areas was smaller.

## Extent to which people wished to be engaged

The survey sought information about the extent to which people wished to be engaged with the work of a range of public institutions<sup>1</sup>. Across all institutions, a small minority of respondents said they were not interested in what the institution does or whether it does its job. Between 4% and 9% selected the option "I'm not interested in what the {institution} does or whether they do their job". Between 16% and 20% selected the option "I'm not interested in what the {institution} does, as long as they do their job". The most common response indicated a 'hands off' approach, with between 35% and 40% of respondents selecting the option "I like to know what the {institution} is doing but I'm happy to let them get on with their job". The proportions selecting the two more active options were smaller. Between 14% and 24% selected "I like to have a say in what the {institution} does and how it does its job" and between 9% and 13%

<sup>1</sup> Local Council, Community Council, Scottish Executive, Scottish Parliament, UK Government and European Parliament.

selected “I would like to have more of a say in what the (institution) does and how it does its job”.

## Activities related to civic participation

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had done any of a list of civic activities<sup>2</sup> in the last year. The most common type of activity was ‘signing a petition’, mentioned by almost a third of respondents. However, in terms of participation in decision-making or influencing government, other than signing a petition, 11% had taken part in a consultation exercise, 5% had taken part in a demonstration, rally or protest, and 5% had objected to a Government proposal or policy.

## Consultation on policy issues

Survey respondents were asked about their views on consultation. On the one hand, respondents felt that government should consult on policy issues – even those that were manifesto issues – but on the other hand were sceptical about the value of consultation. Just over half felt that there is little point in participating because the decisions have been made already.

Despite the scepticism about taking part among a sizeable group of respondents, almost 60% of respondents said they would be likely to take part in a future consultation. Over half of the respondents who agreed with the statement about there being no point in participating said they would be likely to participate in future Scottish Executive consultation.

## Barriers to participation

When asked what prevents people becoming involved in government decision making there was a wide variety of issues that appeared to inhibit involvement. Two issues stood out as being more important than others: lack of awareness of opportunities for consultation (mentioned by 26% of respondents) and scepticism at the value of consultation (mentioned by 24%).

People were also asked what would encourage them to participate in government decision making. There are three issues that stood out as strong motivators for getting people involved in government decision-making:

- if the issue directly affects them or their family (31%)

- if the issue directly affects their local area (20%).

- if it is an issue about which they feel strongly (38%)

When asked whether there was anything that would encourage them to take part in government decision making, 40% said that there was nothing that would encourage them. Of those respondents who said that something would encourage them, the most consistent response was more information (30%). Other options such as training, support or assistance from the Scottish Executive, resources (e.g. internet access), translation services or more time were mentioned by between 1% and 5% of respondents, with very little variation across the sample.

## Information sources

Respondents were asked about awareness of different sources of information about government decision-making and consultation. Almost half of respondents were unaware of any, including the websites of both the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament. However, these were the best known information sources (about a third were aware of each). Nevertheless, only 10% were aware of the Scottish Executive’s consultation website and 3% had heard of seConsult.<sup>3</sup>

In general, websites were not a preferred source of information although the question did not distinguish between initial announcements and making fuller or more detailed information available. The general pattern of responses here would suggest that a focus on internet delivery would be of most use to people who are relatively affluent and who are more likely to seek information and to become involved. Given patterns of internet access and general experience of using the internet, this mode of information delivery is likely to be less effective in reaching deprived communities.

## Giving views

When asked how they would like to give their views there was a consistent preference for traditional mechanisms such as writing letters (35%), attending public meetings (19%) and participating in surveys (17%).

## Conclusion

The study found that while a large proportion of respondents reported having been involved in community or voluntary

<sup>2</sup> For example, voted in an election, taken part in a protest or contacted an MEP.

<sup>3</sup> seConsult is a weekly e-mail alert service providing information on all Scottish Executive consultations.

activity, active participation in aspects of government appears to be something that respondents are willing to leave to institutions and representatives, provided those representatives keep people informed. Respondents reported low knowledge of the work of political or government institutions and few reported any interest in becoming more involved than they are at present.

There were, though, three broad trends across the survey:

- Those in rural areas were more involved and better informed than those in urban areas.
- Young people were less involved and less informed than older respondents, although they also appeared less sceptical about participation.
- Respondents in more deprived areas were less involved and less informed and also less likely to identify anything that would encourage them to get involved.

This document (and other Research Findings and Reports) and information about social research in the Scottish Executive may be viewed on the Internet at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch>

The site carries up-to-date information about social and policy research commissioned and published on behalf of the Scottish Executive. Subjects covered include transport, housing, social inclusion, rural affairs, children and young people, education, social work, community care, local government, civil justice, crime and criminal justice, regeneration, planning and women's issues. The site also allows access to information about the Scottish Household Survey.

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