

Active Inquiry 9 June 2022

Background and participants

[Active Inquiry](#) is Scotland's leading exponent of Forum Theatre, their new 3-stage project Drama for Democracy (2020-2024) explores the possibility of using Scottish Theatre spaces as sites for participatory democracy. Active Inquiry is a community arts company based in Leith, Edinburgh, that works with under-represented communities to use theatre to explore issues in communities and encourage participation in democratic processes.

19 people took part in a hybrid session at the Scottish Parliament. Active Inquiry then used their drama-based methods to answer the questions in the workshop



Participants were from Edinburgh and Paisley and are members of their community arts project. Some participants had experience of homelessness and addiction; others were women from minority ethnic groups who have experience of domestic abuse; and some attendees had experienced mental health issues.

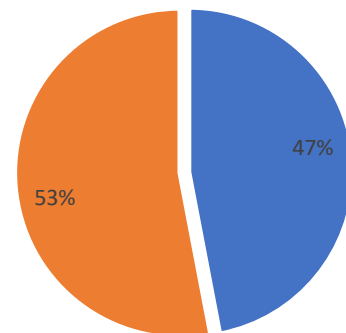
14 people met in Committee Room 5 of the Scottish Parliament and 5 people joined the session remotely. Facilitators from Active Inquiry were present to support participants.

Discussion

Have you ever engaged with the Scottish Parliament before?

Yes 8

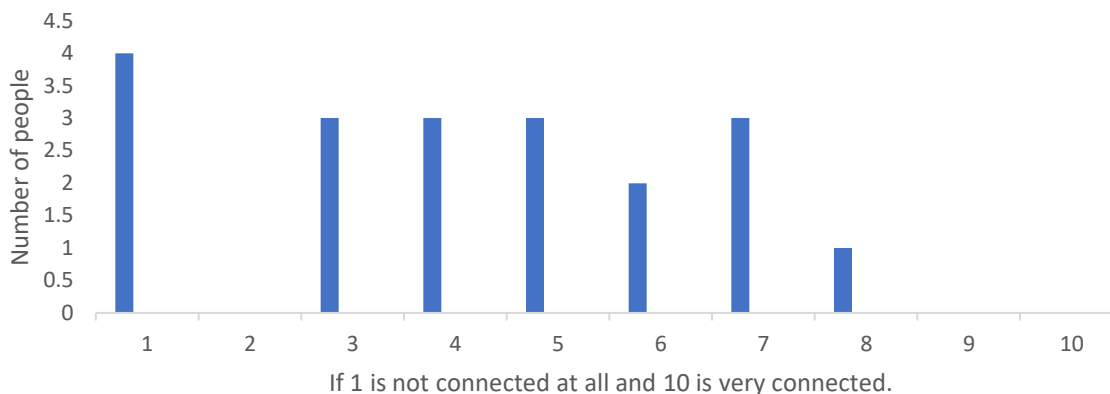
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Eight attendees had been involved with Scottish Parliament in the past, via Parliamentary events and engaging with their MSPs. (It should be kept in mind that five of the group are facilitators from Active Inquiry).

How connected do you feel to the Scottish Parliament?

Participants were asked to rate how connected they feel. (If 1 is not connected at all and 10 was very connected).



Mean result: 4.2/10

Participants who indicated low levels of engagement and connection (1-3) said that they did so because they felt “disenfranchised” with politics. One participant said “I vote but that is as engaged as I feel. I don’t know how to influence change in the issues I care about.” Other participants said they would “like to engage more” but it was “difficult to know what to do or who to go to” when trying to take part in the work of Parliament.

Participants who identified themselves as having medium levels of engagement and connection (4-6) to the Scottish Parliament said they felt this way because they “know what the Parliament does”, another said that they felt connected to Parliament as they are an “active volunteer in my community and I have attended workshops in the past.”

One participant, who was from a minority ethnic background, said that:

“I feel quite connected to the Scottish Parliament because I now work in Scotland and I am supported by services provided by the government” and knowing the Parliament is there to oversee such services makes them feel connected to the institution.

Those who placed themselves at the higher end of the range (7-8) said that they have previously attended the Scottish Parliament for events and even performed for MSPs as part of community drama initiatives. One participant who had experience of participating in forum theatre said that: “I am familiar with the Scottish Parliament and have attended Parliament meetings in the past but now that I’ve learned more about Committees and their role in passing laws, I would be interested to see how legislative theatre (a

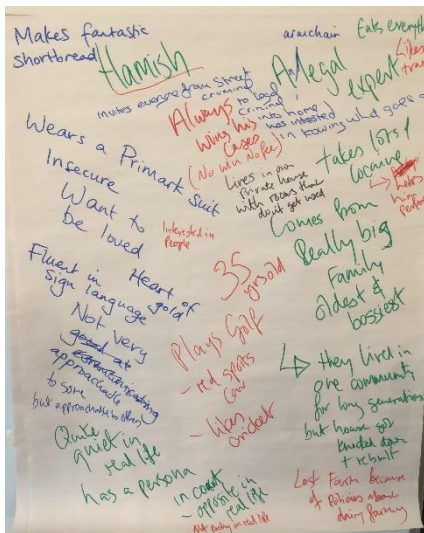
participative method created by Augusto Boal that uses forum theatre to directly focus on policies and laws that could solve problems) could be used to support the work of Committees.”

Another participant said that they felt connected to Parliament because of the “excellent communication” they have had with their local MSP.

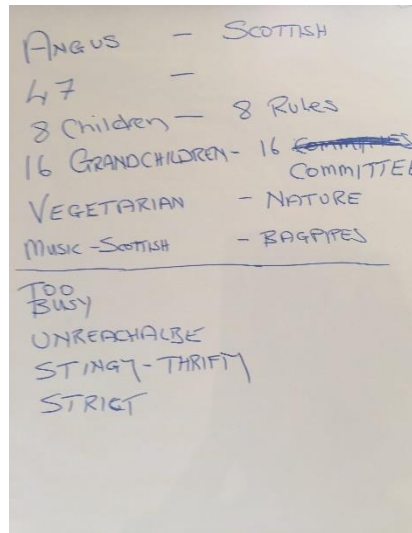
If the Scottish Parliament was a character what would it be like?

The next activity involved participants breaking into 4 groups (one online and three in the room) and creating a character based on the attributes of the Scottish Parliament. The group were encouraged to make the characters as three dimensional as possible by including contradictions in their character traits that would help explore participants attitude towards the Scottish Parliament.

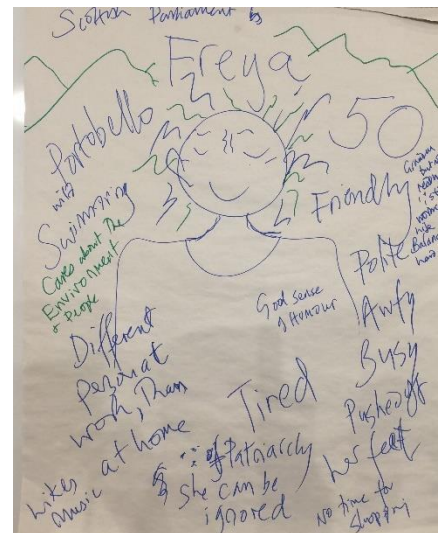
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ANGUS

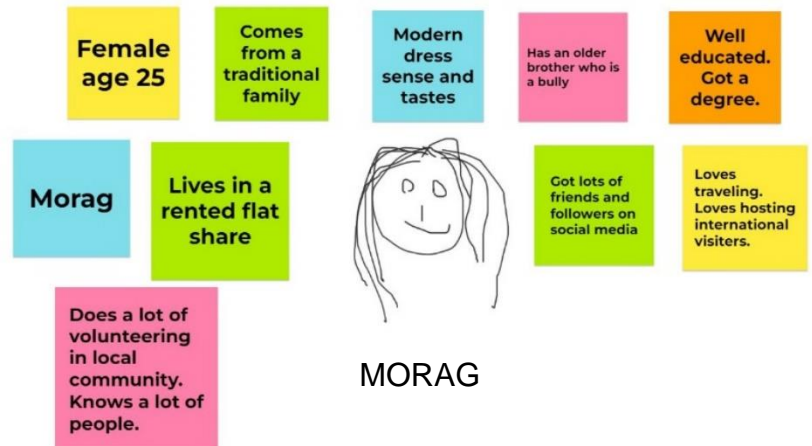


FREYA



Character Attributes

Some of the characters were “young and contemporary” reflecting the relatively young age of the Scottish Parliament. One character was “Morag, a 25-year-old woman with a modern dress sense.” Another character, “Freya” was a “young grandmother of 50 who is not ready to retire” signifying the “nurturing” role Parliament plays in looking after the people of Scotland. Similarly, the Parliament was portrayed as “Angus - a busy grandfather to 16 grandchildren” signifying the Parliament’s 16 Committees.



Contemporary – and younger in relation to Westminster
The Scottish parliament feels less formal and adversarial.

Is there anything that the parliament is currently doing that would put you off getting involved? (Images/Scenes)

The second activity of the session was the group creating short pieces of theatre to express their views on the barriers that get in the way of people getting involved in the work of Parliament. At the end of the session we discussed the meanings behind the four scenes and below is a summary of the outcomes.

SCENE 1

The first scene highlighted apathy, disenfranchisement and feeling ignored which led to feelings of depression and no desire to engage. The group also highlighted the “tangle” of committees and a confusion about how to start engaging in their work.

One participant, who was from a minority ethnic group, highlighted “language and culture barriers” that then lead to them “following the majority view” which may not represent their needs.



SCENE 2

Another scene highlighted the busy nature of Parliament and it being closed off and not able to have the “time” or “budget” to support people to engage in a way that works for them. They also felt that public services generally do not have the time and budget to listen to people and assess their needs which leads to poor outcomes. The scene also highlighted the fleeting way that Parliament can engage with communities. Turning up in a community for one day, having photos taken and then disappearing.

SCENE 3

The third scene highlighted involved the group being spread out across the room to represent the wide range of voices in Scotland and displayed a representation of the Parliament struggling to listen to them all and not accurately representing their views. When discussing the meaning behind their scene the group noted that a lot of Parliamentary engagement was based on “expecting people to fit into the Parliament’s environment and way of doing things” and a feeling that those marginalised in society are ignored by the formal nature of Parliament:

One participant said “you feel like a child who should be seen and not heard.”

Other barriers highlighted in the scene was “not knowing how or where to engage” and some “people are asking for help and not being believed or listened to puts people off.”

SCENE 4

The final scene highlighted the over-reliance on the written word which puts people off from sharing their views with Parliament. It also noted a lack of “budget” and resources to meaningfully engage with the public and indicated that “people are too busy trying to get help with existing problems to engage with Parliament to solve that problem” never mind other issues.” The group warned that this could lead to engagement being “one way traffic” where the Parliament hears views of those in need but does not resolve those issues.

What could we change to make people more likely to engage in future?

The final part of the session involved the groups changing their scenes to incorporate changes they would like to see the Parliament make to ensure more people would be involved in its work in the future.

At the end of the session, we discussed their changes and the types of things they would wish the Parliament could do to improve and diversify its engagement with the Scottish population. Suggestions for change included:

Ensuring engagement is a two-way street.

The group felt that public participation in parliament could be improved if we were able to signpost people to services to solve their problems as well as listening to experiences. Participants encouraged Parliament to ask “How can we help?” alongside “tell us your views.”

“Rather than just saying -‘here is the place you can get heard’ it is actually making plans to facilitate the process so people can get involved.”

There was a feeling amongst the group that the Parliament should do more than “expecting the public to come them” and the “Parliament needs to be pro-active and facilitate people getting their voices heard.” “It is very much about two-way active involvement.”

Longer term engagement

The Parliament should “keep in touch with the groups they engage with” and take the time to work closely with communities in order to ensure they’ve been properly listened to and ensure their participation has an impact. Parliament should “take the time” to “have a conversation with people” and “support them if they need it.” The group noted that “building relationships with communities was really important” for ensuring more people get involved in the work of Parliament.

While participants understood that Parliament was “busy” with a lot of timescales and competing agendas they felt that more time should be taken to gather views as opposed to quick one-off sessions.

More resource, time and support

Participants agreed that Parliament should “take the time” to “have a conversation with people” and “support them if they need it.”

“Time and money are really important for people’s wellbeing” and people should have support available so they can engage in a way that works for them. For example, support should be available for those who wish to write to Parliament but do not feel

confident to write a submission themselves. Instead, they should be able to work with someone to help them make a submission on their behalf.

It should also be made clearer that the Parliament does have some resource to support people to engage, be that by paying for travel expenses, supporting caring responsibilities, translating and adapting materials, or providing food.

Point of contact for engagement and services

The group agreed that the barrier of not knowing where to turn to engage could be solved by having “a point of contact” at Parliament to inform people of opportunities to engage in the issues they care about and to tell people who to contact to solve problems they are facing. This would also help people overcome the “tangle” of information and Parliamentary processes, such as the number and varied nature of Committees.

The point of contact could also put people in touch with support to help them engage in a way they felt most comfortable. “The Scottish Parliament needs to enable people to find their own way of getting involved.”

“It is not just about engaging with people way they are it is also about providing people with a framework – or the opportunity to make their own framework that they can respond to.”

Greater promotion and use of the Happy to Translate scheme

One participant from a minority ethnic group felt that while it is clear the Parliament does a lot to translate its materials for tourists and visitors to the building it is off putting to see a range of translated materials but not find their first language available, in this case Arabic. A potential solution to this problem is do more to promote the Parliament’s use of the Happy to Translate and make it easier for people to request translated materials.

Supporting people to learn about and engage with the Parliament changes their perspective

Some participants commented that sessions, like the one summarised in this paper, help to educate and highlight how people can get involved in the work of Parliament. This made their outlook on political participation more positive and would encourage them to participate in the future. One participant described the experience like the opening of doors:

“One door opens to information, education and learning. Another door opens from outside to inside inviting you into engage.”

The Parliament can encourage more people to get involved in their work if people are given the time and support to learn about the Parliament and told about the opportunities to engage.

Feedback is vital

“The person – me – who is approaching the Parliament needs to feel that they are being listened to, heard, and being recognised as someone who matters. So, getting feedback counts as you are not a voice in the wilderness crying out to this big body where your views can get lost – you don’t know where your views go unless you get feedback.”

Parliament must ensure people can get views in a fair way

Members of the group were interested in the different methods that Parliament can use to get people’s views including digital engagement and deliberative engagement. One member noted that “the Parliament has a problem to solve about how it can represent 5 million people in a fair way” as different methods of engagement should be used but also considered in an appropriate manner to ensure that everyone has a fair opportunity to share their views and also have them heard.

Parliament must balance formal and informal

Many people are too busy with their own problem to engage with Parliament to try and solve that problem. It can feel like “One-way traffic” – people being expected to know how to approach the Parliament.