

Connecting Craigmillar: Kurdish Group

20 June 2022

Background and Participants

Connecting Craigmillar is a project that aims to bring local people together by supporting individuals and groups to take forward new ideas for activities. The Scottish Parliament collaborated with Connecting Craigmillar to arrange two visits to Parliament for individuals from the Kurdish and Syrian diasporas.

This report is a summary of the discussion we had on the 20 June with 4 individuals who live in Edinburgh and are originally from Kurdistan. Participants were also accompanied by a community development worker from the Connecting Craigmillar project.



Participants learned about the work of Parliament, the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee and were taken on a tour of the building. Participants were then joined by Alexander Stewart MSP to discuss barriers to participation and potential solutions that could help to increase community participation in the work of Parliament.

Have you ever engaged with the Scottish Parliament before?

Yes 2

No 3

Discussion

How connected to the Scottish Parliament do you feel?

Most of the group did feel connected to Parliament and this was simply because they had been given the opportunity to visit and speak to Members and staff about the issues they faced.

Other members of the group only felt partially involved as while they vote in Parliamentary elections they did not tend to engage in between elections other than perhaps meeting with their local MSP.

Is there anything the Parliament is currently doing that you think would put you off working with us? (Barriers)

Communication issues: Language Barriers

The main theme that arose from this meeting with members of the Kurdish diaspora was their struggle with communication. In particular, a major aspect of this was the issue of the language barrier, as many members of the community struggle with English. This in turn leads to the community as a whole relying on the members that do speak good English in order to accomplish things they need done, and leaves people feeling that they are an afterthought when it comes to how society operates. The group all agreed that they struggled with the focus on automated phone systems being the primary route to solve a given issue. One member said “even when you get through to speak to a person and they tell you they’re going to do something for you, you don’t know if it will be done in time, or even done at all.” It was generally felt that it’s very hard to get a sense that you are being heard.

Communication issues: “We don’t know how and when we can reach someone who can help us.”

Another issue raised by participants was the lack of clarity around who they should go to for help with issues in their community – while there may be a minority in their community who can “communicate officially” - be able to interact with public sector institutions – most in the community do not know where to start.

Cultural Barriers: community

The second major theme, was the difference in culture between Kurdish regions and Scotland. The group mentioned the tight-knit community feeling with their peers, and the sense that neighbours all know each other and are keen to help each other out, a common phenomenon within their community in their countries of origin and within their community here.

This was contrasted with the relative lack of community feeling in Scotland. As one member said, “back home, I knew my neighbours, we could all rely on each other if someone needed help. Here, I don’t know my neighbours because they don’t want to know me.” This atomisation of community was linked to the issue of their community and the way that it operates, as they find it difficult to meet as a whole when there are no major community spaces for them to use. This leads to conflict with other

locals, who may feel that the parking on the street has been 'taken over' when the community gather for a funeral or a wedding.

Cultural Barriers: the need for face-to-face meetings

Another cultural aspect that was mentioned as causing difficulty is the lack of face to face meetings. They acknowledged that this has been particularly scarce recently due to the pandemic, but emphasised that in their culture, when you need something done, you go to speak to someone in person. It was universally agreed in the group that the physical aspect of seeing the person is key to feeling like you're being taken seriously. This issue runs so deep that members of the group said that everyone they know travels abroad to Turkey to get paid healthcare there, as they simply don't feel that the system here is going to help them properly, and they struggle with the uncertainty of long wait times and the very impersonal nature of the system.

How do we need to change to make you more likely to take part in the work of Parliament? (Solutions)

Support to learn English

"The most important thing is giving our community the opportunity to write and speak English better than they can at the moment it can help them search out and solve issues by themselves."

When it comes to what would help the community take part in the work of Parliament, several ideas were put forward. One of these, linking into what was previously mentioned, was support with overcoming the language barrier. None of the participants were aware that they could request documents to be translated into Kurdish, and they noted that this could be seen as a failure of communication. However, they also highlighted the need for support in learning English. It was stated that as an immigrant community, many members are struggling financially, and so resources to help them learn English are limited, and this is particularly the case for professional English.

Community development to empower communities to engage with Parliament

Another idea was the empowerment of the community itself, giving them the tools and knowledge they need to proactively engage with Parliament. It was suggested that this could involve actively reaching out to community groups, from the Parliament and from local authorities. This would be intended to let them know of issues, and not only issues specific to the community. It was mentioned at one point that "they are a community, but living in the wider Scottish community, and items that affect Scotland affect them too". Cross-party groups could reach out to them and connect them to similar groups or relevant organisations, fostering a stronger integration of the Kurdish diaspora community. It was widely agreed that this increased integration would in turn lead to an increased sense of confidence, and an increased sense that the Parliament works for them too.

To further this, MSPs could question the government on the issues that have been raised as obstacles, as some MSPs will have a strong interest in these topics and will have the knowledge and connections to ensure that they are heard.