Online Drop In Sessions

23 June

Background and participants

The Scottish Parliament's Participation and Communities Team (PACT) offered the opportunity for members of the public to attend a series of open online sessions to participate in the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee's inquiry into participation at the Scottish Parliament.

PACT collaborated with partners in Scotland's third sector to promote the opportunity for individuals across Scotland from different backgrounds. As a result, we had discussions with a diverse range of people including people with lived experience of disability; individuals from the Nigerian diaspora; young people; and those who lived in rural areas.

This report is a summary of the discussions we had on the 23rd of June with 9 individuals who joined the drop in sessions that lasted from 90 minutes to 2 hours.

Have you ever engaged with the Scottish Parliament before?

Yes 4

No 6

Discussion

How connected to the Scottish Parliament do you feel?

Participants were asked to rank how connected they felt to the Parliament on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being the least connected and 10 being the most connected.

Two participants scored 1

Two participants scored 2

Two participants scored 3

One participant scored 4

One participant scored 5

Two participants scored 7

One participant scored 8

* * One participant gave 2 scores, one from the perspective as a Third Sector worker (8/10) and another from the perspective of someone who lives in rural North Scotland (2/10).

When expressing reasons for ratings, those who gave a low score (1s, 2s, 3s, and 4s) told us that:

- "As an individual it's difficult to know which direction to go in"
- "I don't do well with signing petitions and stuff like that"
- I've only ever spoken to my MSP, nobody else in any way connected to Parliament
- "I would like more provisions for disabled people to get involved"
- "North East feels very different from the rest of Scotland, which leads to a feeling of disconnect"

Those who gave relatively higher scores (5s, 7s & 8) told us that:

- They'd previously engaged by signing petitions
- They'd engaged as a Member of the Scottish Youth Parliament but "before becoming an MSYP felt like I was told to "go away" and there wasn't interest in hearing my views." However, MSPs worked well with the Scottish Youth Parliament and this made it easy to get in touch."
- "Engaging with MSPs on specific issues has been very helpful"
- "Connecting through the Third Sector has supported engagement"

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

- Parliament seems to be more "Punch and Judy", less caring about individuals
- Easier to get into contact with committee members when member of SYP, now out of it, less contact/engagement
- Party focus, rather than committee focus
- Parliament is "living in the past" and disengaged from the people it's meant to represent. Needs to be better diversity.
- MSP to citizen relationship is "petition relationship"
- Lack of clarity on how to engage, and other aspects of the running of parliament – recurring point
- Lack of MSP outreach to communities in comparison with the MP outreach

The most recurring theme of the discussion was the lack of clarity on exactly how people could engage with the Parliament and its activities. It was often mentioned that when people wanted to engage, they were not sure who they could speak to, as they said that MSPs felt distant, and not engaged with the community they were supposed to represent. One person said, "I have a closer relationship with my local MP than I do with my MSP."

This was echoed in other aspects of the discussion. For example, one person called the relationship between a citizen and their MSP a "petition relationship", as that was the only way they could get in touch with them or feel that their views were being heard. Two members of the group were former MSYPs, who stated that since leaving the Scottish Youth Parliament it has become a lot harder for them to

communicate with MSPs. There was widespread agreement over this: the lack of accessible channels by which an ordinary, individual citizen (rather than an organisation) can get in touch with an MSP is limited. This leads to people feeling less engaged with the Parliament, and more likely to see it as self-interested.

Another issue that was cited was what one individual called the "Punch and Judy" nature of the system. They said that the various arms of the government (local, Scottish, UK) are too interested in going back and forth blaming each other or the various parties within each arm of government. This creates the impression that they are not interested in solving the problems of the constituents, but rather one-upping their rivals. This was further reinforced by someone saying that they saw the focus of the Parliament as being too party-based rather than committee- or individual-based.

- From an experience of doing surveys for local government, UK government – no feedback, no action taken on completion of the survey except for another survey
- There is a perception that the Parliament works "for" the government, and so distrust of the government slips through to the Parliament
- Recurring notion that it's unclear who to talk to/how to engage
- One participant went to "talk about the most gruelling and upsetting experience of my life, and I wasn't even called on"
  - They then said "I'm not sure I'd put themself in that position again"
  - Felt "demoralised and marginalised", like an "illegitimate witness"
  - Balance between representing people and letting them have their own views heard, e.g. Autistic people can sometimes be mute/nonverbal, is it legitimate to speak on their behalf?
- Conflict between governments (local, Scottish, UK) puts people off participating in politics
- Unclear what the function of list MSPs is as they don't seem eager to represent the people
- When laws are made but not enforced creates a disconnect, e.g., fire alarm legislation

Mirroring the first session, a major theme that arose when discussing barriers to engagement was the lack of feedback from decision-makers to the people who have submitted work or engaged. One participant, who carries out housing surveys, noted that the only response they get when submitting a survey to authorities is the request to perform more surveys, and seldom do they feel like their work is having an effect.

Furthermore, there is a strong perception of the Parliament as working for the government, and people's lack of faith in the government as representing them filters down to a lack of faith in the Parliament too, reducing the motivation to engage. When somebody has an issue, they don't understand or particularly care about the differences between the Parliament and the government, they just want their problem solved and it is very unclear who they need to speak to about that when current methods are not sufficient.

Like the previous session, the issue arose of the conflict between parties and UK/Scottish governments putting people off participating. It feels more like they are

concerned with competing against each other rather than helping the people involved. In addition to this, people don't realise that they can reach out to their list MSPs too. There's a perception that people will look up who their "local" MSP is, and that is the person they will go to, without thinking about the regional MSPs as representing them.

Even when they do participate, this doesn't necessarily mean that they feel heard or valued. One participant, a full-time carer for their son, came in as a witness. "I came to talk about the most gruelling and upsetting experience of my life, and I wasn't even called on." they went on to say that they felt "demoralised and marginalised" and stated that "I'm not sure I'd put myself in that position again". After giving up their time and coming to speak to a committee, the fact they weren't called on was very upsetting and this caused a serious issue with regards to that person's future engagement.

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

- Reduce focus on lobbying groups
- Concern about engagement being a box ticking exercise
- More informal opportunities to take part
- Clarity on exactly how decisions are made
- Need to demonstrate outcomes/impact of views shared – what decisions are made as a result?
- More focus on wide-ranging engagement with ethnic minority groups, e.g. African community, Polish community, Indian community, all in one session together
  - A channel for each community to engage directly?
  - There was some level of debate as to whether overrepresentation of minorities (e.g. 2 in a group of 10 people, as this is not "statistically accurate") was a good idea.
- Actively trying to go to public places to encourage people to get involved
- Educate people on how to get their point across – better signposting, teaching it in schools etc.
- More diversity in witnesses, committees, MSPs, etc. All aspects, and not just "non-white", but real representation for different groups
- Issues with MSPs
  - Is the issue that people don't know they can get in touch with MSPs, or is it that the MSPs don't know how/don't want to do their job?
- More MSP integration of examples from their community in their parliamentary actions, e.g., bringing up specific examples of people who've spoken to them

Possibly the strongest held views on how to improve engagement with the Parliament centred around the need for engagement to feel less like a "box-ticking exercise". One member of the group was particularly concerned around the idea that a lot of decisions feel as if they are a "done deal" by the time they reach the stage of

requesting public engagement, and therefore promote a more cynical view of the engagement process. It was suggested that this could be alleviated by increasing transparency surrounding how decisions are made, and to what extent engagement has a direct impact on the decision-making process.

As it stands, it's felt that the engagement is taken and then essentially cherry-picked to show the results that the call for engagement sought to obtain. Another suggested method was to allow for more informal means of participation to take place. A focus on this would increase engagement by making it feel less momentous to try to get involved, and more something that anyone can do without pressure, or feeling like they will be ignored. Part of this was focused on making sure that participation is accessible to all, and precautions were taken to ensure that people with disabilities were equally able to take part.

The sense of being ignored by Parliament, it was suggested, could be aided by different means. One individual said that they felt a major issue was that of MSPs not being responsive to individuals reaching out to get in touch, and so people don't feel that getting in touch with MSPs is an option, creating a loop which further reinforces the sense that MSPs don't care about the public. The individual went on to ask, "is the root of the issue that people don't know they can get in touch with MSPs, in which case the solution could be education through schools and awareness campaigns, or that the MSPs don't know how to do their jobs, in which case they need proper training to be an MSP once elected."

Again, the clarity on the decision-making process was central to the discussion. It was suggested that there should be reports made public on how decisions were made, who was involved and on what grounds they were qualified or considered "valid" for their engagement. Concerns were raised that participants in online engagement could be astroturfing, by pretending to be Scottish laypeople. As one participant said "they could be an American libertarian for all we know, I don't want them able to influence Scottish politics".

It was suggested there should be more engagement work done within communities: for example, one person mentioned that they had encountered someone in a shopping centre who was trying to get people to get involved in the work of the Parliament. This was widely agreed to be a good method, as it showed the Parliament putting effort in to involve themselves in people's lives, and not just waiting for people to come to the Parliament.

Finally, there was some disagreement within the group on the topic of diversity, and hearing from ethnic minority voices. One person stated that there needed to be more effort put into hearing from a wide variety of backgrounds, as they see the current system as choosing one person from a minority background to represent all non-Scottish people.

They see this as an issue, because it portrays minority groups as a monolith. In contrast to this, they are all very different: the Nigerian community has different interests to the Pakistani community, which has different interests to the Polish community, which has different interests to the Kenyan community, and so on. This person stated that more work needed to be put in to include all of these

communities, rather than including one person from one community and "ticking the box".

One suggested solution to this issue was a direct line of communication between the different communities and their MSPs. Another member of the group, however, took issue with what they saw as the overrepresentation of minority groups. They stated that panels of citizens should be statistically representative of the makeup of Scotland, and so for example, non-white participants should make up 4% of these panels.

They saw this as more important, rather than including more people from minority backgrounds to allow them to represent different communities, or taking the pressure off the individual to represent all minority groups across Scotland.

- Be clearer about how it's using information/completed tasks, to help people feel that there's some feedback and they are having an effect.
  - Increase in transparency.
- Supportive of including as many ordinary people as possible in decision making.
  - Deliberative engagement is praised "10 out of 10 for that from me"
- Make sure it's not just the loudest voices that get heard.
- Need to separate Parliament/Government in public understanding.
- Need to "enable and support people to participate" even when they have other responsibilities.
- Skills audit of MSPs, shown to the public "why is this person in charge of housing? Do they have a background in it? Are they just some person who has taken that role?"
  - Is this the case already but not made known to the public?
- Put the onus on the parliamentarians to reach out to communities and the people.
- More of a way to put people directly in touch with who they need to speak to
- Supportive of the less formal, more engaging format of the Fireworks bill engagements etc.

As mentioned in the previous section, the most important aspect that was repeated most often was increasing the transparency of how decisions are made. Whether done through publishing reports, increasing awareness of the reports that are already being published, or including more people in the decision-making process, that was a major point that came out of the discussion.

This last point in particular was key to suggestions. One participant, upon being told about the deliberative engagement work already being carried out, said "10 out of 10 for that from me". On the other hand, however, it was felt that often it is the vocal minority who are heard from and reflected in public engagement, and so the participants felt that it was key to ensure that everyone is heard from.

Support needs to be given to those with other responsibilities to ensure that they can participate in Parliament, as when someone is struggling to balance things in their daily life due to pressures, it can make it very difficult to also participate in Parliament. Financial support helps, but it can't be the whole solution. It was

suggested that in conjunction with this, MSPs and Parliament staff have the onus placed on them to go into the communities and meet with the public, rather than relying on members of the public to self-select for participation.

A skills audit of MSPs was also proposed, something that would allow people to see why someone was being appointed to a certain committee/position: "for example, why is X person in charge of housing? Do they have a background in planning or another related field or are they someone who has just been appointed to that role but doesn't have any knowledge of it?".

Finally, the group was very supportive of the previous consultation work that had been carried out online, such as that around the Fireworks Bill. This was seen as a great way to get a wide range of views, and easy for people to sign up to and have their voices heard.