

The Assembly

24 June 2022

Background and participants

The Assembly is made up of a growing number of individuals who support and facilitate accessible politics and active political engagement for Scotland's community of people with learning disabilities and/or autism. People with learning disabilities and/or autism can often be disengaged from decisions being made about their lives and research shows that their social participation can be limited to carers and support staff. The Assembly is taking the lead in supporting political engagement in its communities of people with learning disabilities and/or autism.

28 people from around Scotland took part in an online session via Zoom as part of the Citizen Participation & Public Petitions Committee inquiry. People joined the meetings from a number of places including from Glasgow, Dundee and Ayrshire. Not all 28 were there at once as people joined late and/or left early.

To make the session as Accessible as possible PACT gave the following specific examples of Parliamentary engagement and talk through each one in turn:

- Visiting the Parliament
- Contacting a Committee
- Contacting your own MSPs
- Engaging online

Discussion

These conversations took place across two breakout rooms and the key issues raised are detailed below.

Have you ever visited the Scottish Parliament?

Yes 13

No 8

Those with physical disabilities were left feeling quite anxious during their visit, especially on tours as they were split up from the rest of the group in order for them to have access to the lift.

- Going through security was intimidating for some members of the group.
- A member suggested the idea of having autism training for members of the security team, as visitors with autism may feel uncomfortable with being searched.

- The language used was complicated.
- They were planning on attending the CPG on learning disabilities; however it was cancelled after they arrived in Edinburgh, however they were then given a tour.
- Some people were not aware that the Parliament was open and assumed they would have to book and/or pay to visit.

Contacting Committees

Only three participants said they had contacted a Committee and when asked to explain the circumstances, two of them were actually referring to the CPG on learning Disabilities.

Reasons for not having engagement with Committees before:

- People don't know what the agendas are at the committees.
- People are usually invited to give evidence.
- People don't understand how committees work, how they differ and when to get involved.
- There has never been easy access to the committees, they have little interest and they feel like nothing would change with their involvement.
- They never knew that they could get involved directly or by themselves. They thought they had to approach one of their councillors and they would act on their behalf.
- They didn't know where to find the information. A recommendation of put an 'I' for information button on web pages so that those with disabilities can be directed to find information directed towards them.
- Whilst in the building, it would be useful to be signposted to find out more on how they can be involved with committees and how to find out more.
- They worry that online is here to stay instead of people able to meet people and be involved face to face.
- Can we change the names of Committee's to make them easier to understand? Like why can't the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee just be the "Participation Committee"?
- "I don't know what I would bring to committees" (in terms of being prepared to take part, or being seen to be "legitimate" in giving evidence).

Contacting your own MSPs

This question was asked of half the group in one of the breakout rooms and only two people said they had had contact with their local MSPs. Of those who hadn't, the following reasons were given:

- Didn't know who their MSP was.
- Felt they would need help and support to contact their MSP so they could feel more confident about it.

- Seeing MSPs on TV, particularly during things like FMQ's which can seem very combative, puts people off contacting MSPs as they can seem quite intimidating.
- It can sometimes be hard to understand what MSPs are saying.
- They think that the MSPs should come out into communities more.

Engaging Online

The other half of the group were asked about digital engagement in another breakout room:

- Having access to the internet can come as an added cost to those with learning disabilities. They need to pay for the equipment and the monthly bills for internet access. They felt in some cases this would be one of the first things people would give up if they couldn't afford to live.
- Give people more time for consultations with more time to come together and discuss before submitting anything.
- Make the information more concise and break it into separate parts so that they have smaller pieces of information to focus on.
- Split up the information online and label it with what it's about. This will help those that are autistic or dyslexic to know what it will be about and so they aren't reading through things they aren't needing to.
- A concern raised by participants was the increasing shift to digital services and that many people with learning difficulties do not like to use digital channels. "You can't call up your MSP, and if you get through to them, they ask you to email them so you are back to square one."
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Suggestions for making engagement easier

- Easy read booklet to tell us the options about how to engage.
- If you are having difficulties to access online there should be other options to take part.
- "I" logo to provide more accessible information that covers lots of disabilities needs and information (easy read BSL etc).
- Working with organisations like the assembly to send information out to people with learning difficulties.
- Open sessions to sign post people to learn about committees - "meet the committee session"
- There needs to be more support and access to support people to engage. And we need to communicate to give people confidence to engage.
- More Parliament Outreach.
- Time period to engage and then come back- The Bills contain too much information and you need to break it down into clear parts and have multiple conversations over time so people with LD can take time to process info and provide input.