



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body
Thursday 12 March 2026 (Session 6)

Public Engagement Strategy

Executive Summary

1. This paper invites the SPCB to approve the refreshed Public Engagement Strategy, attached as Annex B, which strengthens Parliament's overall approach to public engagement, supports the move toward embedding deliberative participation into committee work, and affirms Holyrood's role as a central and trusted space for democratic engagement in Scotland.
2. This shift requires enabling activities to:
 - **transform outreach and partnership working**, ensuring people across Scotland can participate in ways that work for them;
 - **improve public understanding of how Parliament works**, making routes into scrutiny clearer and more accessible;
 - **equip people with the confidence and skills to use their voice** through inclusive, purposeful engagement; and
 - **balance staff time between activity at Holyrood and expanded outreach across Scotland**, ensuring both are sustainable and resourced.
3. The refreshed Strategy responds to this by modernising how Parliament connects with people across Scotland, strengthening trust, and better supporting Members in their representative roles. It reflects clear evidence of changing public expectations, particularly among seldom heard groups and under-16s, and is grounded in extensive research, feedback and organisational learning.
4. It sets out a sharper, more proactive approach to inclusive, accessible and partnership-driven engagement, supported by a parallel review of public service delivery. This review is streamlining and automating simple public-facing tasks to release staff capacity for:
 - delivering deeper engagement, including people's panels;
 - expanding engagement activity through planned visits to every local authority area;
 - strengthening the Parliament's shop so that it operates on a more sustainable financial footing; and

REFERENCE: SPCB (2026) – Paper 21

- enhancing the schools engagement offer to ensure long-term sustainability, quality and reach.
5. The Strategy can be delivered within existing resources, with digital improvements progressed through standard governance arrangements.

Background

6. The Parliament's Strategic Delivery Plan calls for a refreshed Public Engagement Strategy that reflects changing public expectations and strengthens how people engage with parliamentary scrutiny. Senior Executive Team (SET) discussions and review work have highlighted the need to broaden participation, build trust, and create the conditions necessary for deliberative participation to become an established component of committee work.
7. The refreshed Strategy provides the framework for these changes. It brings together outreach, education, relationship-building, and improved insight, ensuring Parliament can reach a wider and more diverse range of people and support them to take part in its work with confidence and understanding.
8. Deeper outreach and the embedding of deliberative participation require more than new methods. They depend on a Parliament-wide shift in how we reach people, how we work with partners, and how we build understanding of scrutiny, evidence and parliamentary decision-making. This Strategy is designed to enable that shift.

Issues and Options

Key elements of the Strategy

9. The refreshed Strategy is structured around six commitments that collectively deliver the system required to strengthen outreach and embed deliberative participation.
 - **Public Voice** – Clear information, supportive routes to contribute, and transparent feedback showing how contributions influence scrutiny. This strengthens the foundations for deliberative participation by helping people understand how Parliament works and how their input is used.
 - **Community Outreach** – Meeting people where they are and expanding locally accessible opportunities to participate. This step change in outreach is essential for reaching groups who may otherwise be excluded from Parliament's processes.
 - **Under-16s** – Safe, regular and meaningful opportunities for children and young people to understand Parliament and influence its work – building democratic confidence early and enabling participation in future deliberative activity.
 - **Partnerships** – Partnerships that add value, remove barriers and extend reach. Effective engagement requires trusted partners who can connect

REFERENCE: SPCB (2026) – Paper 21

Parliament with communities, build understanding and support people to take part.

- **Culture Change** – Embedding engagement and outreach as a shared responsibility across SPS teams, Members and their staff, enabling committees to host effective deliberative participation and strengthen the scrutiny role of Parliament.
- **Data and Insight** – Stronger use of data to understand who is taking part, whose voices are missing and how public views shape scrutiny – critical for evaluating and improving public engagement approaches.

10. Together, these commitments create a coherent, accessible and trusted system of engagement that brings people’s voices directly into the work of Parliament, supports deliberation as a routine part of scrutiny, and does so while respecting the central role of Members as elected representatives.

Underlying assumptions

11. The Strategy is based on a set of strategic, organisational, people-related and operational assumptions, which are detailed in Annex A to this paper.

Review of public service delivery

12. The ongoing review of public engagement service delivery has progressed in parallel with Strategy development. Work is underway to streamline and automate simple public-facing tasks, freeing staff time for deeper outreach and more complex engagement activity.

13. Engagement activity is expanding across Scotland, with planned visits to every local authority area and eight regional events by September 2026. Improvements will be introduced in line with digital readiness to ensure sustainable, high-quality service delivery.

14. Targeted improvements to the Parliament’s shop are underway to strengthen financial performance and customer experience.

15. Informed by schools engagement research, and by external pressures affecting schools, the Strategy prioritises outreach over travel subsidies. With most educational sessions now delivered in schools or online, there are no plans to introduce a School Travel Subsidy in Session 7.

16. A clear plan for 2026-2028 will guide delivery, evaluation, and reporting, reflecting the organisational and environmental assumptions underpinning the Strategy.

Governance

17. The Public Engagement Board, which I chair, oversees delivery of the Strategy. The Board includes representatives from key delivery areas and an external expert in public engagement. It will continue to meet regularly,

REFERENCE: SPCB (2026) – Paper 21

monitor progress against performance indicators, and provide quarterly and annual reporting.

18. An EQIA has informed development of the Strategy, with particular focus on the needs of seldom-heard groups and communities, including under-16s, and the assumptions relating to accessibility and safeguarding.

Resource Implications

19. The Strategy is deliverable within existing resources. Digital and service improvements will be progressed through established governance and business-case processes. External economic factors and public sector budget constraints will continue to influence investment decisions.

Communications

20. Following SPCB approval, a comprehensive internal and external communications and engagement plan will be developed to support publication and rollout of the Strategy. This will reflect the external environment, including public trust levels, digital expectations, and the need for targeted outreach.

Publication Scheme

21. The paper will be published once finalised and following development of the communications and engagement plan.

Next Steps

22. Further engagement with the public and parliamentary staff will take place to finalise and support delivery of the plan for Session 7. External factors, organisational assumptions and risks will continue to be monitored through governance channels.

Decision

23. The SPCB is invited to:

- Approve the refreshed Public Engagement Strategy.
- Endorse the commencement of the delivery plan from April 2026.
- Note the ongoing and planned work to improve public service delivery in support of the Strategy.

Director of People, Communications, and Inclusion
March 2026

Annex A – Assumptions and External Factors

Assumptions	External Factors
<p><i>Assumptions are the things we expect to be true for the strategy to succeed, such as people having the capacity and willingness to use new engagement approaches.</i></p>	<p><i>External factors are influences outside Parliament’s control that can affect how the strategy works, such as political changes, economic pressures or shifts in public expectations.</i></p>
<p>Strategic and Organisational Assumptions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parliament remains committed to embedding engagement as core parliamentary practice in Session 7. Committees and business planning processes will continue to create opportunities to integrate participatory methods. There is ongoing organisational readiness to adapt ways of working, systems and structures. 	<p>Political</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Political factors could affect parliamentary workload and the capacity of Members and staff for engagement. Shifts in party composition and at individual member level may influence appetite for engagement and new engagement approaches.
<p>People and Capacity Assumptions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SPS staff will have time and capacity to participate in roll out of PES. Members and their staff will engage with new tools, methods and evidence from the Impact Measurement Framework. Partners and communities are willing to participate and collaborate when supported appropriately. 	<p>Economic/financial</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public sector budget constraints may limit investment in engagement infrastructure, digital tools or outreach funds. Cost of living pressures could reduce people’s time or ability to participate, especially for seldom heard communities, further exacerbating inequality
<p>Operational Assumptions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital and analytical infrastructure will continue to improve in line with organisational needs. Safeguarding and culturally sensitive practice will be maintained and strengthened as engagement expands. Priority groups and seldom heard communities can be reached through the targeted methods and partnerships planned. 	<p>Social</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public trust in political institutions remains fragile and uneven across demographics and could diminish further, including with priority groups. Young people expect more interactive, digital and values driven engagement. The landscape of civil society organisations is shifting, with some groups struggling to sustain capacity due to limited funding.
<p>External Environment Assumptions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public appetite for engagement remains steady or increases, despite broader political or social pressures. No major legislative or structural change will fundamentally alter 	<p>Technological</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rapid shifts in digital engagement tools and AI require continuous adaptation. Unequal digital access persists and risks widening participation gaps. People increasingly expect seamless digital experiences that match commercial platforms.

REFERENCE: SPCB (2026) – Paper 21

<p>parliamentary functions during the strategy period.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Civil society partners maintain enough capacity to collaborate effectively.	<p>Legal/statutory</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Data protection and safeguarding requirements influence how participation activities are designed and delivered.• Accessibility legislation sets expectations around inclusive communication and engagement methods. <p>Environmental</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Climate and sustainability considerations place new expectations on how Parliament operates and engages (travel reduction, digital participation, green events).
--	--