



Scottish Parliament Academic Fellowship Scheme 2023/24

Building a strong evidence base and framework for the use of public participation in the Scottish Parliament using two fellowships

Introduction

The [Scottish Parliament's strategic plan](#) outlines that citizen participation is part of its aim to be “a modern, dynamic parliamentary democracy.” This is further supported by the [Parliament's engagement strategy](#) which aims to:

- Increase the reach of the Parliament's engagement and the diversity of those engaging with us.
- Improve the knowledge and confidence of people to engage with us and with the democratic process.
- Improve the Parliament's reputation as a relevant and trusted institution.

We are looking for two academic fellows who will assist us in assessing these aims and how the Parliamentary service can support increased citizen participation moving forward. See below for the background to this and for more details, including skills, proposed timeframes, and potential outputs.

Context - Inquiry into public participation

One of the key themes of participative democracy and engagement is whether the engagement process has a meaningful impact on the outcomes of an inquiry. The Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee heard early on in its [ongoing inquiry into public participation](#) that this ties in heavily to both incentives to participate, and to trust. Put simply, people are more likely to engage with the work of the Scottish Parliament if they feel like their voice matters. They will trust in the process more if the outcome is one of meaningful impact.

As part of the Committee's work, it formed a Citizens' Panel of members of the public to answer the question, “How can the Scottish Parliament ensure that diverse voices and communities from all parts of Scotland influence our work?”. [The panel came up with 17 recommendations](#).

The Committee, as well as the internal board responsible for the delivery of the Public Engagement Strategy, are currently consulting on these recommendations. This will allow them to better understand how they might be applied in the context of the Scottish Parliament. The Committee is aiming to publish a final inquiry report in late-May 2023, and then work will continue within the Parliament to act on the recommendations that the Committee has made.

Exploring recommendations – fellowship approach

The two proposed fellowships are intended to explore one [of the Citizens' Panel recommendations in particular](#): “Build a strong evidence base for deliberative democracy to determine its effectiveness and develop a framework for measuring impact”.

The first fellowship is based on using data analysis to better understand the use and impact of written evidence, which is gathered through both open calls for views and specific digital participation exercises.

The second fellowship will explore what the core guiding principles in applying deliberative approaches might be, and how these might be measured.

Effectively, this helps us to explore the recommendation from both a micro and a macro standpoint. Both fellowships will support the Parliamentary service in understanding how to practically deliver the recommendations of the Committee (and Citizens' Panel) and achieve the aspirations of ensuring that diverse voices and communities from all parts of Scotland influence the work of the Parliament.

Fellowship 1 (Micro view) - Tracing the impact of public engagement through the parliamentary process

The first of the two fellowships is focused on how we can better understand the impact of the evidence gathered through public engagement on the scrutiny work carried out by committees.

Background - Digital tools

The Parliament has been making increased use of digital tools as part of its public engagement, especially for committee inquiries. This began with a pilot approach to exploring the use of tools in Session 5 of the Parliament, with a move to using the platform Citizen Space as the primary means for gathering written evidence at the start of Session 6 (in 2021). Other digital tools are used to carry out more in-depth engagement activities, allowing users to, for instance, debate and prioritise issues.

One of the key benefits of this shift has been making the evidence gathering process more accessible to the wider public – more individual voices and lived experience comes through in evidence, and there is less reliance on the ‘usual suspects’ in supporting scrutiny.

The use of these tools has provided the Parliament's committees with large amounts of structured data on self-selected public opinion of government policy. SPICe regularly supports these inquiries by providing analysis of these responses. However, with tight deadlines and an increasing amount of information to understand and reflect, SPICe has been investigating new ways to support this analysis.

Using text analysis in SPICe

In recent years, SPICe has, on occasion, begun using text analysis to complement the analysis of large volumes of evidence. The main use of the text analysis has been:

- A check and balance for our 'human' analysis, both where we have been able to fully review all submissions, but also as an extra check where we have used random sampling of submissions (due to high response rates).
- Allowing us to [visualise key themes](#) and sentiment and show data in the words used by respondents. This helps to add colour to evidence and better illustrate the lived experience and sentiment shared by respondents.

The project and key skills

Building on our use of text analysis, we would like to see how we might track public engagement through the Parliamentary process. This would involve looking to see if the themes that have come out in the analysis of the engagement appear throughout the Parliamentary process, by looking at the Parliament's official reports (i.e. the verbatim transcript of proceedings) in committees and in the chamber. It will also be useful to see if these themes appear in any Parliament publications, such as a committee report.

The hope is that the learning from the first fellowship might feed in at the final stage of the second fellowship, with the process of tracking evidence using text analysis becoming one of several potential tools which might fit into a broader framework for evaluating the impact of participative democratic activities.

For this work, we are looking for someone who has text analysis skills, specifically someone who is comfortable with analysis of multiple large data sets. SPICe uses R as its main way of analysing inquiry data, therefore, to make the project sustainable it would be preferable that work would be done in R. However, as this is an exploratory project, we are happy to be flexible in the approach and methodology used.

Fellowship 2 (Macro view) – Understanding the core principles of participative democracy and a framework for measuring impact

This second fellowship will focus on the same recommendation from the Citizens' Panel, but from a broader perspective. This is likely to be interview-based and will involve incorporating knowledge on practice elsewhere.

Background

There is already a wealth of academic research and practical experience available on the effectiveness of participative democratic approaches, including within the Scottish Parliament. The Committee themselves have visited Paris and Dublin, and engaged with regional parliaments in Brussels, as part of their fact-finding on practice elsewhere.

In terms of practically implementing this recommendation, what might be more prudent to understand is what features make an activity (a citizens' panel, assembly, or other participative approach) successful and, more importantly, meaningful and impactful, and how success can be measured in a transparent and objective way.

The Project and key skills

This is expected to be an interview-based project, focused on speaking to practitioners and participants (including politicians and members of the public) in deliberative approaches, both at the Scottish Parliament and further afield.

This interview process, combined with existing research, will focus on enabling us to understand:

- what the core underlying principles of a deliberative democracy approach in the Scottish Parliament might be; and
- how these principles might be reflected in both a governance process (with or without legislation), and in a monitoring and evaluation framework which uses clear and measurable outcomes to understand impact.

One key aspect that supports the Public Engagement strategy will be identifying potential ‘tests’ linked to these core underlying principles. This would help us to identify approaches and tools which we could recommend the application of in the decision-making process, particularly when it comes to making best use of resources and balancing competing demands. One measurement tool might be the approach suggested as part of the sister fellowship looking at the micro view, i.e. a suggested text analysis model of evaluation.

Interviews would take place remotely (with Scotland-based interviewees a possible exception). A focus on Brussels, Dublin and Paris may be useful, but other legislatures where the use of citizens assemblies is established may be considered. Support for translation with non-English speaking legislatures (likely to be French or German) will also be considered as part of SPICe’s support role.

We are looking for someone who has skills in interview-based techniques and a grounding in the use of deliberative democracy. A social science background may be useful (not limited to political science), but this is not essential.

Timeframe, working pattern and output

The hope is that **both fellowships will begin in early-summer 2023**. It is expected that the “micro view” fellowship would require three months of commitment. The “macro view” fellowship, being interview-based, may be better suited to a six-month commitment.

Typically, a **time commitment of 1 day a week** would be expected, with the aim of working from the SPICe office at the Scottish Parliament at least 2 days per month. Both the timeframe and working pattern are open to discussion based on academic commitments and further scoping of the projects.

The fellowship placement would see the successful candidate working alongside the Financial Scrutiny Unit and project managed by a Senior Researcher. The data analysis fellowship will also involve close working with our Data Visualisation Manager.

The output would be agreed at the outset, but this is likely to involve, for each fellowship, at least one blog on SPICe Spotlight, a final research briefing, and

potential presentations to the Committee and/or Public Engagement Group and at one of our SPICe breakfast seminars (which are open to all MSPs and Parliament staff).