

Public Participation at the Scottish Parliament

Your Priorities consultation on Citizens' Panel recommendations

Background and gathering views

In October and November 2022 the Scottish Parliament hosted a Citizens' Panel on Public Participation, commissioned by the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee as part of its inquiry into public participation.

The panel set out 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 formed 17 recommendations, on the themes:

- Community engagement
- Deliberative democracy
- Public involvement in Parliamentary business
- Communication and education

[The Panel's final report](#) sets out the panel process and recommendations in detail.

[Members of the Panel gave evidence to the Committee](#) on 14 December 2022, and [the Committee published its interim report](#), with a commitment to carry out further consultation and factfinding on the recommendations, on 16 December 2022.

The Committee launched a [consultation on the Your Priorities digital platform](#) the same day that the report was published, which remained open until 13 February 2023. This platform allowed people to look at each of the Committee's 17 recommendations, to vote for the recommendations they thought should be prioritised, and to discuss the recommendations in more detail (including up or down voting comments made against recommendations). The recommendations were grouped into the themes above.

The primary aim of this consultation was to help the Committee to prioritise the recommendations and understand more about what acting on these recommendations might look like.

The platform included an introduction from both the Convenor of the Committee, Jackson Carlaw MSP, and from members of the panel. This video, and all recommendations, were presented in BSL, and using subtitles. Users had to sign up to use the platform but could do so anonymously, or by linking to their existing social media accounts.

The consultation was advertised on Parliament social media channels, through various stakeholder networks, and shared by MSPs and Parliament staff. There was a recognition that progressing the recommendations could have a significant impact on Parliamentary procedure and resources, so MSPs and their staff and Parliament staff were also encouraged to take part, using internal emails, and the Parliament's Intranet and Corporate Bulletin. Staff also set up an awareness raising stand in the Garden Lobby over three Thursday lunchtimes, which included a change to prioritise and discuss recommendations. 14 members from across all political parties shared their views at these events.

To counter potential digital exclusion, and to support diversity and equal access, the Participation and Communities Team (PACT) and the Parliament's Education team provided support and resources to partners in communities to gather a range of views. As a result, we received additional contributions from people with Learning Disabilities and Autism via two discussions with the Learning Disabilities Assembly, young people in collaboration with Young Scot and the Scottish Youth Parliament, and the views of school pupils in Lochgelly, Galashiels and Glasgow. The views gathered in this manner were incorporated on to the site and have been incorporated into this summary.

In addition, as with any consultation, people were able to write to or email the Committee with their views. Three additional submissions were received this way and have been incorporated into this summary. These came from Bòrd na Gàidhlig, the Scottish Election Study Team (with members from the Universities of Edinburgh, Essex and Glasgow), and Media Education.

Qualitative analysis

Who took part?

A feedback survey was sent to all participants on 14 February 2023, the day after the consultation closed, giving them a week to provide any feedback, and allowing for demographic data to be collected to better understand who took part.

[N. B. Feedback and demographic detail from the survey will be included in this paper once available].

There were 70 participants in the online survey, and these users added 407 votes and 190 comments to the 17 recommendations, which were grouped into the four themes used in the Citizen's Panel report.

Activity, by theme

To better understand the interest from users, number of votes and comments have been broken down by theme. There are two important points to note:

- The order that recommendations were grouped and viewed by users on the Your Priorities consultation was the same as the order and structure used in the Citizen's Panel report, and all users saw the recommendations in the same order/view.
- There were a different number of recommendations within each group, which to an extent explains why some had more users/comments.

The [community engagement recommendations](#), of which there were six, were the most rated and discussed, with 49 users, 164 votes and 79 comments. The mean of votes in this group was 27, and comments was 13.

The [deliberative democracy group](#), with four recommendations, had 45 users, 106 votes and 47 comments. The mean of votes in this group was 27, and comments was 12.

The group with the four [public involvement in Parliamentary business recommendations](#) had 36 users, 79 votes and 17 comments. The mean of votes in this group was 20, and comments was 4.

Finally, the [communication and education group](#), which had three recommendations, had 36 users, 58 up votes and 47 comments. The mean of votes in this group was 19, and comments was 16.

Priorities

Each recommendation, when presented on Your Priorities, had the option to vote using a heart symbol. Users were asked to use this to show favour for prioritising a recommendation, and the sum of these votes gives an indication of overall priority order.

The top five recommendations, in order of priority, were 7, 2, 4, 1, and 8 (which focus on community engagement and deliberative democracy).

The top five most discussed recommendations were 17, 7, 1, 2, and 16 (which focus on communication and education, deliberative democracy and community engagement).

Averaged approach

As noted, the number of recommendations in each group was different. As it is possible that people voted for their favourite recommendations under each group, we have taken an averaged approach to even out the effects of this, and the potential for people's preference and engagement level being impacted by the order the recommendations appeared in.

The mean number of votes across all recommendations was 24, and the mean number of comments was 11.

Ordered against these averages, the community engagement and deliberative democracy groups had more than the average support/discussion in terms of both votes and comments. The communication and education recommendations had fewer than the average number of votes, but the highest level of discussion. The public involvement in Parliamentary business recommendations had higher (but below average) vote levels, but very little discussion.

Nine recommendations had more than the mean number of votes - 7, 2, 4, 1, 8, 9, 6, 12 and 3 (all but one in each of the of the community engagement and deliberative democracy groups of recommendations, and one of the public involvement in Parliamentary business recommendations)

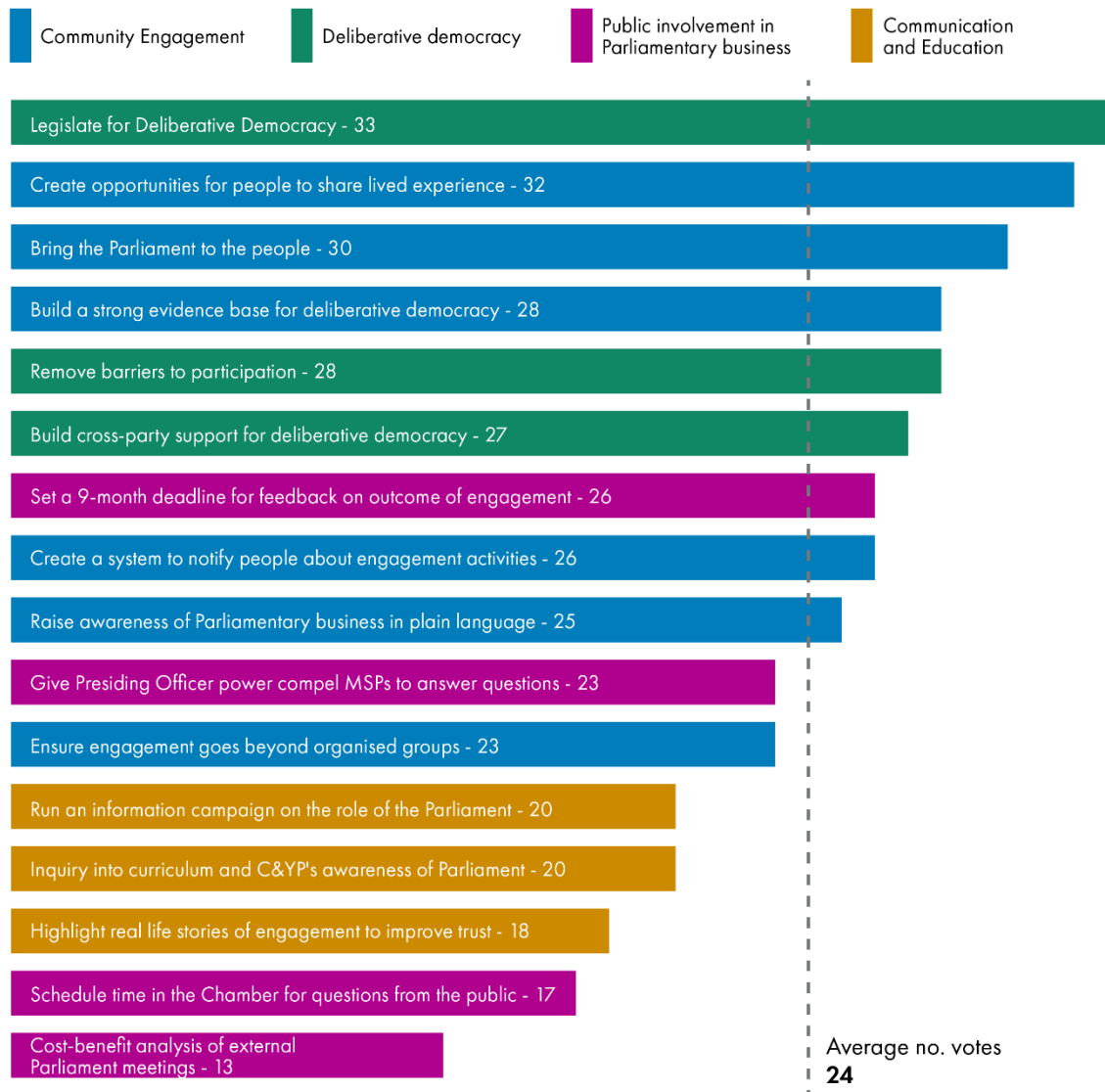
Seven recommendations had more than the mean number of comments - 17, 7, 1, 2, 16, 4 and 5. This reflects that most discussion took place on community engagement and communication and education, plus the recommendation on legislating for deliberative democracy, but it should be noted that the two groups mentioned here are the two which were the focus of the most offline engagement.

Overall priorities

The following chart shows the prioritisation of recommendations by number of votes, with the recommendation theme taken into account. This helps to demonstrate that there may not have been too much impact from the order in which people viewed recommendations.

N.B. As noted in the text above, there was a variance in the mean number of votes within each theme, so some of the recommendations may fall above the overall average but below the mean vote within their group, and others may below the overall average but above the average for their group. Due to this, and the small sample size, SPICe advises against considering this priority order in isolation. Rather it can support understanding of the wider body of evidence being gathered by the Committee.

Prioritisation of recommendations, by number votes



Priority conclusions

The people that took part in the Your Priorities consultation were most supportive around the recommendations on community engagement (with recommendation 2 being the highest priority and 5 being the lowest).

The deliberative democracy recommendation on legislation was the most popular overall recommendation, and others in this group were also high priority (with the exception of recommendation 10, on setting up a people's panel to discuss the MSPs Code of Conduct).

Communication and education recommendations were much discussed but did not rate highly as priorities compared to recommendations in other groups, with all recommendations in this area falling below the mean. This may be because many of the discussion points were gathered through outreach activities rather than directly on the consultation platform.

The public involvement in Parliamentary business recommendations were not discussed much, but there was strong support for recommendation 12 on a 9-month feedback deadline.

The qualitative analysis should help to understand people's voting choices more.

Qualitative analysis

At this point, the order in which recommendations are presented diverges from what was presented in the Citizen's Panel report and Committee interim report, and on Your Priorities. Recommendations in the following qualitative analysis are in order of priority, based on the voting aspect of the consultation. They do, however, still have their original recommendation numbers for reference.

It should be noted that just because a recommendation did not end up being a high priority, may not mean it lacks support, because there is the possibility as noted that the order the recommendations were presented in may have had an impact on people's engagement with them, or that the gathering of views offline reflected less in voting. It is also possible that some of the more procedural and technical recommendations were ones that people felt less able to vote or comment on.

Within discussions, people were able to up rate or down rate comments. In no instance were comments down rated, and where there were ratings, often these were singular. However, where comments were noticeably up rated, the votes for these will be reflected in the order of narrative. Although there were not ratings to suggest that people were for or against recommendations or approaches, where there are comments on both sides this is reflected. Suggestions and comments which fell either outwith the scope of the recommendation or competence of the Scottish Parliament (or Scottish Government) are noted under 'Other comments'.

Recommendation 7

Legislate for Deliberative Democracy in order to ensure that:

- **diverse voices and communities from all parts of Scotland influence Scottish Parliament's work**
- **the public are consistently informed and consulted on local and national issues**

In drawing up this legislation the Parliament should:

- recognise that there is not one engagement solution that fits all situations and issues
- design and implement a framework based on this panel's recommendations for ensuring diverse participation in deliberative democracy.

The framework should include:

- An annually recurring citizens' panel with agenda-setting powers to determine which local and national issues require either national or local people's panels (e.g., 'deliberative town halls')
- Protection for participants to improve participation. We do not agree that participation in panels should be mandatory, but protective elements such as the right to time off work should be included for people who are selected to take part.
- Rules around how MSPs consider and respond to recommendations from people's panels such as mandatory follow-up to people's panels' recommendations no later than 9 months and a response from the Parliament and Government
- Potential for mixed MSP–people panels
- Ability to form local panels with local MSPs with outcomes that are sent up to the national level"

Recommendation 7, from the deliberative democracy group, received the highest number of votes – 33. It also had the second highest number of comments at 19.

Supporting comments

The recommendation was described as exciting, with the highest rated comment saying that the agenda setting powers was particularly interesting as "to date almost all citizens' assemblies have had

their agenda set by others and this would give such a panel much more scope to tackle the issues that elected representatives may shy away from handing to a citizens' panel.”.

Commentors felt that Citizens' Assemblies should be used more to inform the work of the Scottish Parliament and that they could bridge the “gaps between elections”. It was also suggested that they would be a good way to bring more representation to rural communities. People also spoke about how this approach would be generally more representative and diverse, and there was praise and support for ‘doing politics differently’ and getting away from ‘politics as usual’.

The use of citizens' assemblies in Belgium and Ireland were mentioned as positive and aspirational, notably the experience from Ireland that “when people understand these kinds of processes to be part of the normal way of making complex decisions that affect everyone, via this kind of institutionalisation, participation levels are very high and responses are positive.”.

The act of legislating was seen as important to ensure that recommendations from panels were acted upon (particularly if there is a mandatory reporting system in place), and that legislation would support the provision of adequate resources to deliver deliberative democracy. The Electoral Reform Society Scotland said that “the Scottish Parliament should work to embed the ambitions outlined into its ethos and practice” and gave added support to the idea of local citizens' panels.

Concerns and considerations

It was highlighted that, even in the context of support for deliberative democracy, it was important to think carefully about how deliberative democracy “interacts with the principles of representative democracy that the Parliament is based on”. Another person said that any legislative approach would need to be simple and suggested that requiring MSPs to hold a certain number of community engagement sessions per month might be more effective.

One person said that this was a “big and expensive idea”, and that panels would need to be large enough to be representative (as well as randomly selected). The Learning Disability Assembly said that involving social care staff and ‘preferred support workers’ in the process would support people with learning disabilities to take part, including those who are nonverbal.

One person suggested that legislation should not be needed as deliberative democracy should already be at the core of what the Scottish Parliament does, and another felt that MSPs are elected to represent Scotland and that the public has the option to ‘vote them out’ if they don't like their decisions. Another was concerned about having a small group of people speak for all of Scotland, noting that different areas have different problems and suggesting that using community council input would be more effective.

Other comments

Two people suggested that a Citizens' Assembly, formed by sortition, should be the only legislature, and saw this as an aspirational end to partisan politics, and one person suggested that there should be an independent organisation to monitor the influence of lobbyists.

Recommendation 2

Create opportunities for people to use and share their lived experience to engage on issues that they care about.

When identifying witnesses, ensure an even balance between academic and professional experts, and people with lived experience

Recommendation 2 received 32 votes and 16 comments and was the most popular recommendation in the community engagement group.

Supporting comments

The most popular comment was from Community Development Alliance, who suggested using community development expertise “to ensure those with lived experience are ably and fully supported to engage with various stakeholders in a safe, supportive and confidential dialogue.”. Lived experience and diversity of views was seen by many as crucial to the success of deliberative democracy.

One person suggested that it wasn't about having even numbers of representation, rather about ensuring that those with lived experience had space to share their experiences with trauma-informed and trusted support. Another said it was important that people be able to share positive experiences as well as negative ones. Learning Disability Assembly suggested that everyone should be able to have a say on issues that matter, not just those with lived experience.

Concerns and considerations

One person said that lived experience should drive the drafting of legislation (rather than being brought in at post-drafting stages) and should come from individuals rather than representatives as much as possible. Similarly, one person thought that consultation in general should be more widespread to reach rural and remote communities, and throughout the scrutiny and legislative process.

ActiveCitizen agreed with the importance of using lived experience, but highlighted that depending on the issue, Parliament also needed to hear from professional experts, campaign groups and commercial interests. One contributor said that “collective views are also important as these take into account individuals' experiences but arrive at collective solutions that assist most, if not always all, of those affected by current inequalities”. Another emphasised the need to make decisions based on empirical rather than anecdotal evidence.

JustCitizens highlighted the importance of fair compensation for participation, as well as trauma-informed approaches and the avoidance of excluding people outwith groups.

One contributor felt that more needed to be done to balance the needs of different groups, and to hear ‘working class voices’, saying “MSPs and Committees could get better at hearing (politically) unpopular views from more diverse people.”. The evidence in the submission from the Scottish Election Study Team correlated with this, with them explaining that their research had found that “the lowest participators are those people who are most likely to be significantly challenged for day-to-day resources for living (e.g., time, space and money) - that is, single mothers” (this was even the case when controlling for university degree, social class and income). The team drew attention to and reiterated a recommendation from Carmen and IPSOS Mori's 2009 report that “Community Public Information Officers (CPIOs) be trained on the various ways for the public to engage with the Scottish Parliament (e.g. the public petitions system, cross-party groups, contacting MSPs, etc.) and undertake public outreach in areas where they are likely to find people with more limited resources”.

Other comments

Some comments referenced a need to involve local communities more in decision-making and policy-making, specifically in the context of wind farms and NPF4.

Recommendation 4

Bring the Parliament to the people.

The Parliament should test approaches to using regional engagement/information hubs and/or a travelling exhibition or mobile unit.

Recommendation 4, in the community engagement group, received 30 votes, and had 14 comments.

The most popular comment overlapped with **Recommendation 17** on education, as it emphasised the importance on education on the Scottish Parliament, rather than referring only to the suggestions in recommendation 4. JustCitizens also felt that school education on Parliament was crucial.

Supporting comments

Many of the comments veered towards using existing resources, including venues and means of communication, as well as community councils. Learning Disability Assembly suggested that mapping out community centres and libraries, advertising opportunities to engage, advertising dates in advance and providing buses to those with transport needs would all help. Another contribution suggested that making sure that venues and times were accessible to people with disabilities was important, and felt that more Committee meetings could be held outside Parliament.

JustCitizens suggested that MSPs should find more ways to hear from people, with less reliance on office-based appointments. It also supported the idea of a travelling exhibition to reach smaller communities. One contributor spoke about positive experiences with a Scottish Government Travelling Cabinet event, saying “Travelling Parliament events involving groups of MSPs going out could be similarly vibrant, illuminating and accessible”.

One suggestion (which links to **Recommendation 16**) was the use of digital advertising screens in town/city centres. Another spoke their own negative experience of not having their voice heard by their MSP on geopolitical matters, and said “Each area should have a hub where people can find out about what is being presented to parliament, and there should be a clear and easy process for people’s voices to be heard. The hub should be within easy walking distance, and it could be something as simple as a stand by the entrance to the local supermarket or library. There should also be regular, fixed dates where people can get together to discuss concerns with each other and with their representatives in group discussion.”.

Bòrd na Gàidhlig felt that this should include specific engagement with Gaelic speakers and users, in both the Highlands and Islands and in urban areas elsewhere in the country.

Concerns and considerations

One of the higher rated comments said that this was ‘a great idea’ but felt the costs would be ‘enormous’ and the engagement ‘low’. They suggested that better resourced community councils might be a more effective way to direct resources. This was echoed by others, who felt that using community councils, schools and libraries would be help to tackle social media misinformation, and that better funded community and regional councils would encourage more participation.

Community Development Alliance Scotland said that understanding the similarities and differences between communities of geography and communities of interest is crucial, as is using community development expertise.

One person said they didn’t see what this recommendation added beyond existing models of constituency engagement and advertising of Scottish Government consultations.

Other comments

One person felt that a first step would be to strengthen local democracy with better funded community councils and regional councils.

Recommendation 1

Remove barriers to participation so that everyone has an equal opportunity to be involved in the work of the Parliament.

- Follow up on previous research by researching different methods of engagement, who they work for, and the resource that is needed to use these methods.
- Apply research to use different engagement methods to reach the whole of society, including non-digital and digital approaches.
- Raise awareness that the Scottish Parliament will provide payment which addresses the cost barriers that people face when coming to the Parliament and taking part in engagement activities, such as travel expenses, lost income from time off work, childcare and additional costs related to accessibility requirements.
- Ensure access for people with English as a second language including promoting and improving use of Happy to Translate. Support participation from those with learning disabilities by promoting and increasing the of Easy Read.

Recommendation 1 had 28 up votes and 18 comments. None of the comments in this discussion were upvoted.

Supporting comments

Kevin Ditcham agreed with the suggestion to review existing research, citing that there is a lot of detail that can be drawn on. One person suggested identifying hard to reach groups by committee (or committee cluster) and using focused and evaluated strategies to reach them. Another suggested that speaking to people with different disabilities to understand the range of needs was important.

One contributor said there is good research available on ways of addressing these issues, but that it needed to be applied and implemented in Scotland, especially among those experiencing poverty and inequality. They also said that “further thought should be given to removing barriers and empowering equal participation of people in institutional residential settings: such as hospitals, care homes, secure care facilities, mental health and psychiatric facilities, prisons, drug rehabs, homeless facilities, or immigration facilities”. They continued to explain that “Strategy and effort goes in to communicating with, informing and enabling these people and groups to vote in elections and referendums (as it pertains to their human rights and the franchise), but this could be better prioritised and more action taken regarding enabling their political participation during the parliamentary session.”.

JustCitizens felt the recommendation was very important and suggested that one positive step would be encouraging more flexible working patterns among MSPs, local representatives and civil servants (who they perceived as working 9-5). They thought that accessible after-hours events in community spaces and providing support for care needs was important.

Community councils was a theme again, with the suggestion that they should be directly involved in Parliament. Libraries, schools, places of worship, local councils and community development networks were also seen as important in ensuring local community involvement.

There as support for a public information campaign (which links to **Recommendation 17**), using adverts on the radio and in local newspapers.

In its submission, Bòrd na Gàidhlig that any recommendations made by the committee developing this should include specific reference to Gaelic users and learners, and that Gaelic users should be one of the groups considered when looking at groups who struggle to engage in the work of the Parliament. It said that better provision of documents in Gaelic and making people aware that they could use Gaelic when engaging with the Parliament would increase interest and participation by Gaelic users.

Concerns and considerations

One person said that there should be a focus on action rather than research, as barriers were already known. Another thought it should be possible to use international best practice to save time “researching solutions that may already exist”.

One person was concerned that it would be difficult for the Scottish Parliament to be ‘heard’ in a ‘world of information saturation’. They also highlighted that participation is time consuming and repetitive, and although they praised Easy Read as a format they wondered if it would be appropriate for more complex issues.

Learning Disability Assembly said that even in Easy Read documents there are “still too many words for some people to understand”, and that more needs to be done to make information as accessible as possible, more quickly. They suggested that the Official Report should be available in this format, promptly. They also said that more thought needed to be given to people who can’t communicate via speech or writing, and that non-digital options should be available, saying “Helplines would be helpful, including interactive phone lines (press 1 for “agree” and 2 for “disagree”)”. For those that do use digital options, they supported the wider use of Apps and QR codes. Finally, they highlighted the importance of building in time for consultation, and being mindful of consultation fatigue, and suggested that the Parliament should work directly with the Learning Disability Assembly on what can be done to improve lives for people with learning difficulties and autistic people.

Making the benefits of engagement clear and being realistic about how much people can/want to engage was highlighted by another contributor.

Other comments

One person highlighted that lack of broadband remains a huge driver of inequality in Scotland and that those who are unable to go online are “left helpless”. Another agreed that broadband should be seen as a public utility.

The accessibility of Committee meetings, being in the morning, was highlighted as a barrier to disabled people attending. The commentor in this case said that people should be allowed to attend online if needed [*N.B. this suggests that the individual was not aware that this is already the case*].

Recommendation 8

<p>Build a strong evidence base for deliberative democracy to determine its effectiveness and develop a framework for measuring impact.</p>
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This recommendation on deliberative democracy had 28 votes and 10 comments. There were no upvoted comments.

Supporting comments

ActiveCitizen said that this would be a key part of understanding how deliberative democracy and representative democracy should coexist. Another contributor agreed that a system of accountability and measuring this, in the context of impact, was crucial. It was noted by another that there is a wide academic evidence base that could inform a framework in Scotland.

Electoral Reform Society Scotland emphasised the importance of cultivating a culture where citizens are motivated and educated as part of the political process, and that this means “learning from international best practice, creating models/examples and placing deliberative democracy within the wider context of democratic renewal.”.

Learning Disability Assembly said, “One thing to check that it works is if the Parliament listens and takes on board recommendations or explains why they are not taking on board recommendations.”.

The submission from the Scottish Election Study Team noted that there was already a significant amount of existing research that could be drawn on. It suggested that the Committee might wish to

“convene a panel of experts (many of whom are based in Scotland) to facilitate the assessment and analysis of the Peoples’ Panel recommendations to help ensure their workability and success”.

Concerns and considerations

One contributor said that a key metric would be that ““deliberative democracy” is not limited to those who are sufficiently motivated to take part in person or have time off/financial freedom to do so.”. Another said that a measure of success would be that the outcomes of each panel could be realised through a set of measurable, attainable, and reasonable goals.

One contributor explained that impact should not just be about the outcomes, but about the quality of the process, including whether people have felt supported, informed, and listened to (even if their preferences are not the ones adopted).

Other comments

One person said that community council powers should be strengthened through legislation, including being able to compel MSPs and local councillors to answer questions from and meet with community councils.

One commentator said it would be important for this to be done through independent sources rather than government-funded organisations.

Recommendation 9

Build cross-party support for deliberative democracy as this is needed for it to work
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Recommendation 9 on deliberative democracy had 27 votes and 10 comments, with no upvoted comments.

Supporting comments

Most comments agreed on the importance of this, to ensure a wide range of opinion and move away from “posture politics”. Commentors felt that more visible cross-party collaboration was key to ensuring trust, alongside more face-to-face interaction with communities. Electoral Reform Society Scotland said that cross-party support for deliberative democracy was not an optional extra, but a requirement.

Contributors felt that highlighting the success of approaches would help to build cross-party support, and that it might help members to engage more with ‘normal members of the public’ more than lobbying groups. Learning Disability Assembly also highlighted that it was important to have cross-party agreement on the best way to use people’s panels.

JustCitizens said it believed that “cross-party support can be a great starting point for deliberative democracy. We would all benefit from seeing a Scottish Parliament willing to work together on specific issues and open to involving individuals on a regular basis.”.

Concerns and considerations

One contributor said that it was important to consider how to “effectively safeguard against one political party in Holyrood smearing or trashing the credibility, priorities and recommendations of citizen participation in deliberative democracy – if it is ideologically and politically expedient for them to do so. If this happened, some of the tabloid media would willingly amplify this, for clicks, sales or viewing figures”.

Electoral Reform Society Scotland said that “Effective knowledge-building materials and resources should be made available to MSPs, with key spokespeople working together to maximise democratic outcomes for citizens across party political lines”.

Only one person suggested that they did not support this, as they did not see it as a priority for elected representatives. They argued in favour of more representative democracy at a local level

rather than what they described as “an extra process of consultations under the banner of “deliberative democracy.”.”

Recommendation 12

Set a 9-month deadline as a default for feedback on the outcome of any engagement with clear reasons where this deadline would not be met (if applicable). The live status of the decision making process should be clear and transparent throughout.

Recommendation 12, on public involvement in Parliamentary business, had 26 votes and three comments (none upvoted), and was the highest rated in the public involvement in parliamentary business group.

Contributors agreed, saying that engaging with people was only valuable if there were outcomes. It was noted that this could be challenging though as timescales and communicating outcomes require care, but policy development, change and outcomes can take years.

The Scottish Electoral Study Team said that “Whilst it is important to convey outcomes, it is equally, if not more important, to ensure that concerned persons understand the processes by which outcomes came about.”.

Recommendation 6

Create a system such as a webpage where people can register and be notified about opportunities to engage.

Recommendation 6 on community engagement had 26 votes and 10 comments (none were upvoted). Comments on this focused mainly on considerations, rather than direct support.

Considerations in support

One person suggested that this should be a two-way interface, where people could input information about issues that concerned them. Another said that it was important to allow time for people to engage in this, and a few commentators said that that sharing and advertising opportunities to participate still needed to happen via multiple channels, and that traditional (and offline) methods of engagement should not be lost.

The suggestion was made that incentives to participate, such as prize draws (as often seen in market research), might encourage people who wouldn't otherwise take part to do so.

Making an option that worked for mobile users was highlighted as important, with the suggestion that the European Parliament's app for citizen engagement as a potential template worth exploring. Accessibility was also seen as a key consideration, including taking into account those that don't use social media

Community Development Alliance Scotland thought that using community development skills, expertise and experience would be essential to ensure a broad audience and the involvement of key partners. JustCitizens welcomed the recommendation but thought that talking to local organisations, centres and community spaces to understand what works best and where existing communications channels could be used would be better than designing a new website from scratch.

Concerns and disagreement

One person thought that a web page was “an oversimplification of the issue” but did not give alternative suggestions. Another said that people should not have to register a special interest to be involved in consultation. Finally, one person said that they didn't see how this would increase engagement, because those interested in specific issues would already “be part of either a lobbying

organisation, activist network, mailing list etc". They also felt that the less engaged would feel uncomfortable providing their personal data to become part of a database.

Other comments

Two contributors raised concerns about the current Scottish Parliament website, saying that it is "hard to navigate without guidance and support" and that the current website "has proven somewhat counterintuitive and difficult to use for those of us who already know Holyrood well and know what we are looking for."

One person felt that all major proposed changes to law should be explained clearly to the public, and that the public should be given the opportunity to vote on whether bills proposing major changes should be passed (the examples of major changes used were around the full-term abortion of infants with Down's Syndrome, gender recognition, and the right to demonstrate).

Recommendation 3

Raise awareness of Parliamentary business in plain and transparent language including visual media

Core principle: Use clear and direct language and visuals to communicate information about parliament, including legislation.

Undertake research into the general public's level of trust and knowledge about the everyday work of the Scottish Parliament.

Recommendation 3, another in the community engagement group, had 15 likes and 10 comments.

As with **Recommendation 4**, there was an overlap with the recommendations on communication and education on education, with comments on how schools should be doing this, and the suggestion of using news programmes targeted at children to raise awareness of Parliamentary business.

Supporting comments

Contributions generally agreed that simple and effective communication should be used, and that technical language is a barrier to engagement. One user noted that this was not just about accessibility, but about explaining the processes and language of Parliament to people. It was suggested that expanding the current training and outreach approaches would support this. There was, however, a reminder from one user that the current level of detail shouldn't be lost, so there is a need to communicate in a variety of ways.

There was support for using more Plain English and Easy Read information and promoting this as widely as possible. One person noted that laws "can't be too simple", but a summary of them would be useful. Another said that detail on MSPs profiles also needed to be more accessible.

JustCitizens said that MSPs should play a role in using social media to explain what they do and engage with citizens more directly, and that SPICe could produce short videos to summarise their briefings. They also said that "One way to increase engagement is to break down complex concepts into understandable terminology without being condescending to the groups one is trying to reach. This must be done without taking away from the complexity of legislation and political components, giving people the opportunity to access the full picture, rather than small snippets."

Concerns

One person disagreed with the need for more research on the grounds that it is expensive and takes time, saying "Just take steps to make real democracy a reality now".

Other comments

One user said that low turnout at elections prove a need for a citizen's assembly to replace the current legislative model.

Recommendation 5

Ensure that community engagement by MSPs doesn't exclude people that are outwith community groups, including by using evenings, weekends and online services.

Recommendation 5 was the lowest rated in the community engagement group, with 26 votes and 11 comments.

Supportive comments

One user tied this recommendation to **Recommendation 6**, saying that setting up an online platform that helped people to engage was good for those who couldn't attend fixed meeting times.

As in other discussions, the need to include people who don't use social media was highlighted. Suggested approaches including using community councils, local councils, trade unions, schools and, going beyond existing structures, using community development trusts. Flexible hours approaches were seen to help more 'working class people and communities' to engage. Another user said that it was important to involve those who were otherwise regularly excluded, but that speaking to organised groups with specific protected characteristics could help to identify unintentional barriers to representation.

One user noted the importance of being aware of the impact of evening/weekend models on the work/life balance of MSPs, particularly those with children and other commitments. Another noted that MSPs needed necessarily be involved in evening/weekend sessions.

One person said that surgery times could be confusing, and that it would be useful to have one specific designated premise for surgeries. Learning Disability Assembly said that surgery days make it hard to engage with MSPs, meaning that Parliament sitting days had to be used instead, and that Parliament should be more flexible. They also highlighted the importance of making sure that MSPs were properly educated on learning disabilities and autism. JustCitizens suggested that MSPs could use informal events at local libraries to explain more about their work at the Scottish Parliament.

Disagreement

One user felt that it was for MSPs to decide which communities they engage with, and that constituents could vote them out if they were unsatisfied.

Recommendation 13

Give the Presiding Officer the power to compel MSPs to give an answer to all questions asked: that is, a direct reply that is relevant to the question. This should include a process for a deferred answer if an immediate answer cannot be given. This will improve public trust and engagement.

Recommendation 13 on public involvement in Parliamentary business had 23 votes and 6 comments. These comments were evenly mixed in favour and against, and none were upvoted.

Comments in support

In support, contributors thought it was important for politicians to answer questions directly, as not doing so "wastes time" and was a way to "fob off" the public and other parties.

JustCitizens said that "Ensuring there will be an answer when a question is asked, means that people across Scotland can understand without filters what is working and what is not working, and with time this will create a culture of trust towards MSPs and the role of the Scottish Parliament.". They suggested that a written answer system could accompany this, and that this change could encourage more members of the public to ask questions through their elected representatives and to pay more attention to Parliamentary business.

Comments against

Those speaking against the recommendation didn't see how it could work in practice and noted that not all questions have a direct answer.

One person said that people from different political positions may have differing views on the relevance of an answer and suggested that "questions are usually asked for political point-scoring". Another person thought it was up to the public to decide on the relevance on answer and thought that a culture of respect towards the Presiding Officer was more important.

Finally, one person said that MSPs should be free to answer as they wish and represent their constituents as they see fit. They also raised concerns that increasing the powers of the Presiding Officer would create the danger of the role being "another power centre to "capture" by political parties".

Recommendation 16

The Parliament should run a general information campaign explaining the role of the Scottish Parliament – a single brochure or leaflet explaining who your local MSPs are, what a call for views is and the role of the Parliamentary service and its impartiality and separateness from Government.

Recommendation 16 was the highest rated on the communication and education recommendations, with 20 votes and 15 comments (none upvoted). Seven of these comments were collated by facilitators from discussions with high school pupils.

All comments were in favour of an awareness raising campaign, with the need to help people to understand the difference between Parliament and Government being a main theme. It was felt that addressing this could help people to "reconnect with democracy", "inspire democratic engagement" and "engage with the election process".

Using a variety of approaches, including taking a best-practice approach on accessibility was supported. Suggestions included:

- Simple infographics for social media sharing.
- Behind-the-scenes documentaries on TV.
- Encouraging more party-neutral communication of Parliamentary business from MSPs.
- Short, snappy, entertaining and fun videos on social media (including TikTok and YouTube shorts).
- Radio and TV adverts, including celebrities to "draw people in".
- Adverts on bus information boards.
- The use of surveys in schools.
- More use of education outreach, with both outgoing and incoming visits.
- More job shadowing opportunities at the Parliament for senior pupils.

Only two comments explicitly agreed with using a leaflet. One person suggested a leaflet should be sent out at least once a year, with people being directly informed about who their elected representatives are, and another felt a leaflet should be one of a variety of concurrent approaches used.

As a counterpoint, one person suggested that it would be important to increase opportunities for engagement/training events using existing community networks as well, as "People who think they are not interested in the Scottish Parliament are not going to read a leaflet". High school pupils agreed, saying that social media-based approaches would be more engaging for young people, and that paper leaflets were "not relatable" and "a waste of paper".

Recommendation 17

The Parliament should hold an inquiry into the relationship between the aims of the current curriculum and the Parliament to explore systematic changes that can be made throughout schools and in communities to improve children and young people's knowledge and awareness of Parliament - and deliberative democracy - including through mentorships, internships and competitions.

Recommendation 17 had 20 votes, and 22 comments, 10 of which came from high school pupils.

All contributors agreed that more should be done to educate children and young people about governance and different political systems, the Parliament, and engaging in the work of the Parliament. Specifically, many people felt that this should begin at a younger age. It was felt that doing this would support participation and encourage young people to become more politically engaged and involved and improve turnout.

Electoral Commission resources were highlighted as being ideal to build upon and use in both school and youth work settings, as well as within parental discussion packs.

In-school approaches

There were many suggestions on what approaches might work in school, including:

- Yearly assemblies with local decision-makers to show young people what it's like to be in office.
- Giving pupils lessons on how to ask effective questions (based on age and ability)
- Using PSE and Modern Studies classes to teach young people about the Parliament, in an unbiased way.
- Complimenting this with pupil surveys, outreach work by Parliament staff, Parliamentary information being given in assemblies, and optional lunchtime classes. Targeting surveys towards specific subject groups was also mentioned, i.e. sending surveys on planning issues to Geography students.
- Making learning about how the Scottish Parliament works a mandatory subject in school, but also potentially expanding the duty of education providers to ensure that education on local and national democracy is delivered in community learning and further/higher education settings.
- Linking learning about Parliament and public engagement to education on Human Rights and Children's Rights.
- School trips to polling stations on polling days, and to election counts, to allow them to "see the democratic process first-hand".
- Making sure that materials used are disability friendly and in EasyRead, Braille and audio formats.
- Providing Scottish Parliament branded merchandise so that young people would become familiar with the institution.

Outside of school approaches

There were several suggestions on engaging school-age children and young people outside of school. These included:

- Encourage the participation of children by better educating parents and encourage "active citizenry" more widely, so that they pass this knowledge on. Better resources local groups and community councils was seen as a way to do this.
- Engage young people through activities such as after school clubs, youth clubs and groups like Guides and Scouts, interactive events and community activities.
- Use advertising (as per suggestions on recommendation 16, but also including Discord).
- Providing volunteering opportunities for young people.

- Having MSPs visiting communities more often so that young people know their local MSP, and targeting more engagement in local communities towards younger people.
- Moving elections to Saturdays so that parents could give their children more experience of the voting process.

Incentives were also mentioned, such as running competitions, and offering prizes like vouchers and coupons to encourage participation.

Finally, on the specific wording of the recommendation, one person felt that an inquiry was not necessary to achieve the aspirations set out above.

The Scottish Election Study Team agreed with the importance of this recommendation but noted that in its research young people were one of the most participatory groups in its public samples. It said, “We would certainly advocate political engagement with young people – but from a perspective that recognises that they may already be more engaged than might otherwise be realised in public discourse.”.

Other comments

More widely, people thought that young people should have more opportunities to share their views, to the extent that engaging with Parliament would be seen as a normal part of young people’s lives.

Some pupils felt that the voting age should be further lowered, to below 16. One school group said that some pupils suggested that mandatory voting would encourage engagement, and others disagreed and felt voting should remain a personal choice.

Recommendation 15

Use media outlets, documentaries and short films to highlight Parliament successes and real life stories of engagement to improve public perception and trust.

Recommendation 15 was the least popular of the communication and education recommendations, with 18 votes and 10 comments (none upvoted).

Supporting comments

Support for documentaries and videos came from the perspective of people having the right to information on the Parliament and TV and radio being an effective means to reach many people.

People said that would be interesting to hear directly from MSPs about their work, including challenges and achievements, but also about their career path. There were also comments that said this type of media could show “average people in Parliament”, and cover different age groups and a diverse range of voices.

There were also suggestions of using media to track issues and pieces of work, or to reflect. For instance, Learning Disability Assembly suggested that “the Covid-19 recovery committee could do a short film about how people have found the pandemic and the impact it has had on their mental health and then this could be used in evidence to be sent to the government.”.

Outside of the Your Priorities platform, Media Education provided a briefing on its work on Participatory Video, a “a creative approach to citizen participation in decision making”, which included examples and testimonies about the benefits of the approach.

Concerns and considerations

Kevin Ditcham said this was a tricky area to get right, but a valuable one in building trust. One commentator said it was important that any media products would need to have cross-party support to avoid being seen as propaganda.

It was highlighted that young people would be more likely to view this type of content on social media, but there was also the suggestion that specific time could be given in school to read emails and watch

videos from the Scottish Parliament. One person suggested the use of “creative competitions and artistic initiatives that can inspire people to get involved and are easily shared on social media.”.

Other comments

One person suggested that the Scottish Parliament should “engage with faith groups, sports clubs and other civic society bodies directly to build up links with their members”.

Recommendation 10

We recommend that one of the panels which should be set up is a specific people's panel to discuss the MSPs' code of conduct

Recommendation 10 was the least popular of the deliberative democracy recommendations, with 18 votes and 8 comments, none of which were upvoted.

Comments suggested a mixed understanding of how this might be applied, and feelings on appropriateness. Indeed, Learning Disability Association said that people need to know more about the rules for MSPs.

The comments that were in favour were based on a perception of politicians ‘not following rules’ and a need for an assessment of how effective the MSPs Code of Conduct is.

One person felt it was more appropriate for lawyers to set the MSPs Code of Conduct. Another said that there is “a lot of sensational information out there about politicians' conduct” and that the current Code is already complex, regularly reviewed, and enforced, so this should not be a priority. It was felt by another that it would be inappropriate for elected representatives to be subject to a code of conduct decided upon by an unelected panel.

One person highlighted that such a panel wouldn't be needed “once a Citizen's Assembly takes over”.

Recommendation 14

Schedule specific time in the debating Chamber for individual public questions to be asked.

Recommendation 14, on public involvement in Parliamentary business, had 17 votes and 5 comments (none upvoted).

Two of these comments were in favour. JustCitizens supported it based on the current system making hard for individuals to have their questions asked in the Chamber but said that an accessible and inclusive model would be essential. Learning Disability Association also supported a disability friendly approach, in which people could phone to put questions forward. They suggested that it could tie into a People's Panel process, and noted that a clear process would be needed to avoid repetition of questions.

In disagreement with the recommendations, one person argued that “the Parliament is for parliamentarians”. There were specific concerns about people hijacking limited parliamentary time and using the model for personal gain, meaning there would be a need for careful regulation. There were also concerns about due regard for the impact on individuals asking questions, including their privacy and safety, and the wider impacts on legitimacy and trust in the Parliament.

Recommendation 11

Carry out a cost-benefit analysis of the Parliament itself or committees meeting outside of Holyrood and compare this to (a) more support and targeted invitations for people to come to Holyrood and (b) reinstating Parliament days (MSPs going out into communities for a day of activity).

Recommendation 11 received the lowest number of votes overall, at 13, and tied for the fewest comments (with **Recommendation 12**).

Learning Disability Association liked the recommendation but felt there should be a focus on getting out into communities and understanding what spaces and resources were already available, and on building community relationships. They emphasised that it was challenging for people with disabilities to travel to Holyrood and supported more community visits. Another user agreed that it was important for the Parliament to meet outside of Holyrood. However, they didn't think it should be decided based on a cost-benefit analysis. Likewise, another user didn't see how it was possible to cost-benefit analyse participation and engagement.

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