

Unusual Suspects

Committee Engagement at the Scottish Parliament

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores committee engagement at the Scottish Parliament. It looks at the issue of ‘the usual suspects’ – influential pressure participants that dominate consultations – and what committees can do to get beyond them, to engage with individuals and groups who might not ordinarily take part in the work of parliament.

To do this, five cases of successful and innovative engagement were investigated:

- Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee: Work, Wages and Wellbeing Inquiry
- Welfare Reform Committee: Your Say Initiative
- Education and Culture Committee: Inquiry into decision making on whether to take children into care
- Equal Opportunities Committee: Age and Social Isolation Inquiry
- European Committee: Connecting Scotland Inquiry and International Development Event

The aim was to document good practice, and draw out lessons for engagement. A secondary objective was to evaluate each case, and, more generally, to contribute towards Parliament’s thinking around the evaluation of engagement.

Key findings include:

- Looking at the issues of bias, representation and inclusion only in relation to formal evidence-taking provides an incomplete picture.
- ‘Unusual suspects’ can offer lived/direct experience. This adds value to committee deliberations, makes an impact on MSPs, and can be used effectively when supported by other forms of evidence (i.e. with triangulation).
- To date, committees have done little to evaluate their engagement work. Evaluation has focused on process, and has not involved external participants to a significant extent.
- There has been a tendency for committees to work in silos; however, recently there have been moves towards a more joined-up way of working.

- There is a perception that committees are not good at closing the feedback loop.
- The Parliament has difficulties in tracking its audiences, which has implications for its engagement work.

Recommendations:

1. Parliament should continue to move towards joined-up working, in line with the Committee Engagement Strategy. How this works should be assessed periodically.
2. Build on the wealth of good practice documented in this report and elsewhere, and consider mechanisms for sharing innovations and learning.
3. Consider developing a more systematic approach for tracking audiences: a contact management system.
4. Develop an evaluation programme for committee engagement. This should involve evaluation of both processes and outcomes (especially impact on policy and policymakers), and take into account the views of those engaging and being engaged. Possible methods include focus groups and interviews. Committees should seek feedback from participants on their reports and other outputs as standard.
5. Look for opportunities to further involve the public (or publics) in deliberation, agenda-setting, and consensus building, particularly in open or politically divisive areas. Some committees are already setting precedents for this, which could provide models.
6. Address the perception that committees do not do enough to close the feedback loop. Following up on recommendations and keeping in touch with contacts is important here.

1 INTRODUCTION

This report explores committee engagement at the Scottish Parliament: who committees gather evidence from, and how they do it. This matters, because engagement enables committees to scrutinise policy and hold the government to account. Engagement also connects citizens to their representatives at Parliament between elections. However, a perennial concern since the Parliament was established has been about bias: are we inclusive? Committees tend to engage primarily with the ‘usual suspects’: frequent participants who dominate policy consultations. This has implications both for political equality and for good legislation.

This research investigates the issue of the ‘usual suspects’, and then asks how the Parliament can enable ‘unusual suspects’ to have an impact on committees. Using a case study approach, it aims to illuminate what ‘good’ engagement looks like, and draw out best practice. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the literature, touching on: Parliament’s relationship with the public; who committees engage with; ‘engagement’ as a concept; literature on ‘hard-to-reach’ groups; and how engagement can be evaluated. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology. In Chapter 4 research findings are presented under three heading: issues, good practice, and organisation. Here the challenges and opportunities facing committees are documented, as well as innovative work underway in the Parliament. This leads to recommendations and conclusions which are set out in Chapter 5. Summaries of the case studies are included in the appendices.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 PARLIAMENT AND PARTICIPATION

The prevailing narrative around the establishment of the Scottish Parliament was of a 'new politics', breaking with Westminster tradition, which would be more participative, deliberative and inclusive. This was expressed in the guiding principles of the Consultative Steering Group (CSG) report (1998), particularly the core principle of 'access and participation.' Winetrobe, in his comprehensive audit of the new Parliament, observed: 'Civic engagement was at the heart of the CSG agenda, embodying the spirit and letter of its key principles' (2001, p.90). Central to this was an emphasis on engaging with 'those groups traditionally excluded from the democratic process', rather than only the 'usual suspects' – influential and well-organised pressure participants (CSG 1998). Committees were to be (and are) a focal point for this engagement, providing a link between people and elected representatives that is sustained between elections.

However, as commentators have observed, the expectations of 'new politics' were unrealistic (Jordan & Stevenson 2000; Mitchell 2000; Cairney & Johnston 2013). Winetrobe identified tensions in the design of the Parliament from the outset, particularly between competing notions of representative and participative democracy, which have never been resolved (2001, p.161). The failure to address these meant that 'traditional thinking won out': the Parliament has tended towards modes of representative democracy, along the lines of the 'Westminster family' of parliaments to which it belongs (Mitchell 2010).

The tension between representative and participative models of government continues to play out in the way the Parliament works. It is particularly evident in relation to the Parliament's public engagement activities, where there is uncertainty about the extent to which the public should participate. Winetrobe (2003, p.11) observes:

There will be obvious pressures for the Parliament to develop more insular tendencies, as a collective memory grows among its members

and its staff. Substantive public engagement may become regarded as an inconvenient and potentially inefficient factor.

To counter this tendency, Winetrobe argues that the principle of participation needs to remain a substantive benchmark, and committees must embed civic engagement techniques into their working practices, as opposed to treating them as an ‘add-on’ (2001, pp.67, 137, 190).

2.2 USUAL SUSPECTS AND COMMITTEE ENGAGEMENT

The ‘usual suspects’ refers to influential and well-organised groups with policy specialisms who tend to dominate consultations and crowd out other voices. Concern about this phenomenon centres on the possible threat to democracy, because some groups are overrepresented at the expense of others: a bias in the ‘heavenly chorus’ of pressure participants¹ (Schattschneider 1960, p.35). However there is a ‘logic of consultation’ with the ‘usual suspects’, as these groups have resources (expertise, representation, and advice) that policymakers need (McGarvey & Cairney 2008, p.238; Cairney et al. 2009), and fostering mutually rewarding relationships may be valuable to the policy process (Halpin, MacLeod, et al. 2012, pp.8–9).

The term can be pejorative, but that is not the intention here: the aim is not to criticise those who **do** participate, but to broaden participation. It is common shorthand, not a technical label: there is no precise definition in the literature. (For a discussion of ‘usual suspects’ see Halpin, MacLeod, et al. 2012).

Several commentators have perceived this bias towards usual suspects in the Parliament’s engagement. Paterson, for example, argues that engagement has been dominated by the professional class of Scottish civil society who oversaw government before devolution: ‘a vindication of the power of ancient networks’ (2009, p.118). Similarly, Bonney (2003) notes the privileged position of devolution campaign partners after devolution. He sees a ‘usual suspects’ culture developing,

¹ ‘Pressure participant’ describes any body that attempts to influence policy (Jordan et al. 2004)

where consultation is often limited to 'stakeholders', i.e. organised interests, at the expense of diffuse public interests. Service users' voices, he claims, often go unheard. This is a theme in literature. (For a discussion of 'publics' and 'stakeholders', see Cornwall 2008b; Abelson et al. 2007; Mohr et al. 2013)

Turning to empirical studies, Bonney's assertion that service users are rarely consulted is supported by research by Halpin, MacLeod et al. (2012, p.11). They provide a descriptive account of who gave written and oral evidence to committees in sessions one and two. (At the time of writing their dataset is being updated to cover subsequent sessions). They find that there is a core of heavily engaged participants who give evidence to committees (i.e. 'usual suspects'), with central and local government, government agencies, the legal profession and trade unions being frequent participants. Elsewhere, Halpin, Baxter et al. (2012) compare the populations of pressure participants involved in committee evidence-taking with those engaged in government consultations. They find that in committee evidence-taking, business and public institutions are less active than in government consultations, and that interest groups account for a larger proportion of the population. Following Salisbury, the authors suggest this may reflect the visibility of committee evidence-taking: interest groups need to be seen to engage by their members.

In addition to the 'logic of consultation', reasons for the 'usual suspects' phenomenon are suggested by studies from elsewhere. Geddes (2016), building on research by Berry and Kippin (2014), investigates evidence-taking in the UK House of Commons. He also finds that committees tend to rely on 'usual suspects', and identifies a range of factors that affect witness selection:

- Agenda of inquiry (only certain people are qualified to speak on topics)
- Direction from members
- Political balance (prioritised over other forms of diversity)
- Timetable issues
- Small network (pool of witnesses associated with a policy area may not be representative)

- Witness availability
- Performance (i.e. capacity of witnesses to give 'good' evidence)

Research by Pedersen et al. (2015) compares committee evidence-giving in the three national parliaments of the UK, Denmark and the Netherlands. They find that institutional arrangements affect who gives evidence; most importantly, closed processes (by invitation) can broaden engagement and involve those who might otherwise not participate.

There are, however, limitations to these quantitative studies of pressure participants. First, there is no standard against which to assess bias, and it is difficult to envisage what an unbiased system might look like (Lowery et al. 2015; Halpin & Jordan 2012). The lack of a point of reference prevents discussion from being focused on evidence: any conclusions are subjective. Second, the categories typically used to classify pressure participants may not represent important categories of analysis, and give no indication what side of an issue participants take (Baumgartner & Leech 1998, p.118). Third, presence does not equate to influence; a prevalence of a certain type of pressure participant does not necessarily mean they are influential (it could be quite the opposite) (Halpin & Jordan 2012, p.11). Measuring influence is extremely difficult (Dür & De Bièvre 2007; Pedersen 2013).

Perhaps more importantly, committee evidence-taking is only part of the picture. Committee engagement comprises a much broader range of activity; few studies, however, have explored less formal kinds of engagement. McLaverty and MacLeod (2012) look at civic participation in committees (engagement with the public and marginalised groups beyond standard consultation), providing an overview of practical and theoretical issues. Arter (2006) surveys committee activities outside Edinburgh, and looks to see if they have succeeded in engaging people from outside 'network Scotland'. His evidence is quite limited and anecdotal (indicative of the knottiness of the problem and difficulties with measurement), but he concludes that external activities do broaden participation, even if it is not clear whether this is the intention. Finally, Davidson et al. (2011) explore committee engagement through a deliberative lens. They document instances of deliberative consultation where

committees have created opportunities for policy discussion between the public, stakeholders and MSPs (as opposed to conventional witness questioning). They find that deliberative events are in decline, and point to a middleman paradox (resistance to innovation on the part of parliamentarians) and a tendency to narrowly conceptualise participation in a way compatible with norms of consultation and representation, ignoring the potential benefits of the deliberative process.

In summary, the literature suggests there is a bias towards 'usual suspects' in committee engagement, although as the preceding discussion illustrates, it is difficult to assess the extent or consequences of bias. This report takes this as the starting point, and looks to see how engagement can go beyond usual suspects.

2.3 CONCEPTUALISING ENGAGEMENT

The terms (public) 'participation' and 'engagement' are frequently used interchangeably in the literature. This report follows Stewart (2009, p.3), who defines engagement as an instrumental form of participation:

'Engagement' is ... instrumentalist in character... [It comprises] deliberate strategies for involving those outside government in the policy process.

This definition fits well with committee engagement, as the priority is to hold government to account.

Regardless of the term used, it is important to recognise that engagement comprises a range of activities that entail differing degrees of involvement for participants. Many different typologies exist (Cornwall 2008b; Shipley & Utz 2012; Catt & Murphy 2003). Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation categorises types of participation, ranging from 'non-participation' at the lower rungs, to 'citizen power' at the higher rungs (with 'consultation' near the bottom). This recognises the potential mismatch between the goals of participants and decision-makers, and the unequal distribution of power between parties. Following Arnstein's seminal contribution, engagement is often conceived of as a spectrum, with control by authorities at one end and citizen control at the other (often with the implicit

normative assumption that more participation is better). Later models take a managerial approach, where different levels of engagement represent a set of choices for policymakers, and are linked to a suite of tools (Bishop & Davis 2002).

These models are contested, and the clear categories they present become ambiguous in practice. Arnstein's focus on power relations makes her model difficult to apply to many contexts (for example, parliament, where citizen control would be at odds with the need for elected representatives to make decisions). Stewart (2009, p.5) observes that 'contemporary thinking sees engagement in more fluid terms,' where 'types of engagement are strategies corresponding to different kinds of situations and outcomes, rather than indices of power differentials.' Similarly, Cornwall (2008a, p.273) writes: '[m]uch depends on the context and on those within it. Different purposes, equally, demand different forms of engagement by different kinds of participants.' In some circumstances, extensive engagement will not be necessary; however, it is important this does not become an excuse for policymakers not to engage.

The Parliament's engagement is atypical, in that the executive will already have consulted on legislation that comes before committees. Furthermore, while engagement is normally seen as a strategy for improving policy itself, in this context engagement serves to improve scrutiny of the executive, and is thus an indirect route to influencing policy. As Mitchell (2000, p.614) points out, this raises questions about the nature of meaningful participation. But committee engagement can connect citizens to their representatives in between elections, and complement representative democracy by addressing broken linkages and unresponsive government (Fung 2006; Warren 2009).

2.4 ENGAGING 'HARD-TO-REACH' GROUPS

When thinking of the representativeness of participants, the other side of the coin to 'usual suspects' are 'hard-to-reach' groups. Again, there is no concrete definition, but this refers to those who are (self) excluded, and would not normally participate in politics unless extra effort is made. These can include economically marginalised people, disabled people, young people, ethnic and linguistic minority communities,

and even local business people (Hansard Society 2011; Nicholson 2005). The term is contested: as Cook (2002) points out, it can be stigmatising, and assumes homogeneity. It also displaces responsibility: 'hard-to-reach' for whom? These groups could also be described as 'easy-to-ignore', or 'expensive-to-reach' (Warburton 2010, p.51). Literature reviewed for this report suggests the onus should be on the Parliament to engage, not the other way around.

Nicholson (2005, pp.39–43) identifies two main approaches to engaging 'hard-to-reach' groups: positive action (levelling the playing field and lowering barriers to facilitate participation on a wide-scale) and targeted engagement. She notes that a central message in the literature is that methods of engagement need to be adapted to specific sectors; off-the-peg approaches will not work. Outreach is key (Cook 2002). A report by Flinders et al. (2015) makes useful recommendations in this respect (which are supported by the findings of this report), and stresses the importance of working with intermediaries, building relationships, deliberation, local engagement, language, space, and a flexible understanding of evidence.

2.5 EVALUATING ENGAGEMENT

While there is a wealth of literature available on the subject of evaluation (e.g. Brandon & Ah Sam 2014), there is none specific to the activities of parliaments. However, there is a nascent body of literature on the evaluation of public engagement/participation, which is relevant to committee engagement. Literature reviews by Abelson and Gauvin (2006) and Abelson et al. (2003) provide a good starting point.

Warburton (2010, p.53) gives the following definition: 'Evaluating engagement is a process that assesses the *quality* and *effectiveness* of a project or programme.' *Quality* and *effectiveness* broadly correspond to *processes* and *outcomes*. In the past, evaluations have tended to focus on processes, but there is now increasing emphasis on *outcomes*, and evaluation criteria routinely combine both elements (Nicholson 2005, p.45; Warburton 2010, p.55; Abelson & Gauvin 2006; Gastil et al. 2012, p.207). However, generic frameworks are often too abstract, so it is generally agreed that criteria must be tailored to the specific activity.

Evaluating engagement can help to:

- Clarify objectives
- Improve current engagement activity as it progresses, through built-in review and reflection
- Improve future practice: develop knowledge and evidence of what works
- Demonstrate accountability and legitimacy: show the value and cost-effectiveness of activities to ensure good use of resources, and gain institutional support (Warburton et al. 2007)

However, there are some significant challenges in designing evaluations. These include:

- **Defining success:** No widely accepted criteria; multiple elements may constitute success, so need to be weighted.
- **Different perspectives:** Participants and policymakers will have different goals and different conceptions of success. According to Warburton (2010, p.39), 'the crucial outcomes and benefits for these two audiences are influence for the public, and reassurance in decision-making and strengthening/enriching the evidence base for policy makers'.
- **Measurement:** 'Effectiveness in this domain is not an obvious, unidimensional and objective quality... that can be easily identified, described and then measured' (Rowe & Frewer 2004, p.517).
- **Participant satisfaction:** this is often used as a proxy for success, but some argue it is irrelevant (Coglianese 2002; 2014) and success should be judged by officials on the demand side. However, participants are well placed to judge process (Warburton 2010, p.52); it is usually recognised that evaluation should consider all perspectives (Abelson & Gauvin 2006, p.14).
- **Tracking policy impact:** It is difficult to isolate one element in the policy process, and prove causality. For instance, policymakers often see engagement as one of many influences on their decisions, and may not acknowledge the role it plays (Barrett et al. 2012, p.189).

- **Timeframes:** Tracking impact is complicated by the lag between engagement and outcomes. When is the end-point of the engagement, for the purposes of evaluation? (Abelson & Gauvin 2006, p.13).
- **Costs and benefits:** It is difficult to quantify/monetise costs and benefits of engagement (but see Warburton 2010; Clarke 2015).

Given that the primary purpose of committee engagement is to support scrutiny, evaluation should focus on outcomes. Barrett et al. (2012, p.188) observe, ‘focussing on [inputs and processes] tells us much more about an institution’s democratic performance, while [outputs and outcomes] are more closely connected to policy performance.’ Still, process matters: participants’ opinion of the engagement depends largely on whether they feel their views were listened to and respected, and much less on the final decision (Warburton 2010, p.51). This is reflected in Chris Carman’s (2010; 2006) findings on perceptions of procedural fairness in the Parliament’s Public Petitions System.

Abelson & Gauvin (2006) identify three outcome variables: policies, decision-makers, and participants. Most literature has focussed on impacts on participants rather than on policy; impact on decision-makers is completely overlooked. However, decision-makers are perhaps the most relevant and accessible for evaluating ‘impact’ in the context of committee engagement – especially given that committees are at one remove from policy, which is designed by the executive.

How might impact on policies or policymakers be measured? Warburton (2010) proposes a practical set of questions to identify when engagement has made an impact on the policy process. Has the process resulted in:

- Anything new being added to public policy proposals?
- Anything being removed from public policy proposals?
- Anything being raised in priority in public policy proposals?
- Anything being lowered in priority in public policy proposals?
- Greater confidence in specific proposals that were contentious, and thus going ahead?

- Less confidence in specific proposals that were contentious, and thus not going ahead?

There is rarely an audit trail to answer these questions. However, Warburton suggests, data could come from review of documents, or interviews with policymakers. The former would be complicated and time-consuming, so it seems likely that members would need to be involved, and as they are busy people, this might necessitate a 'light touch' evaluation.

However, if evaluation of committee processes and outcomes relies entirely on MSPs, there is a danger of gatekeeping (Davidson et al. 2011). This is all the more reason for evidence-informed evaluation that incorporates a range of perspectives, which can inform choices about how resources are allocated and to encourage institutional buy-in.

Finally, the evaluation methods used will depend on the level of evaluation, which in turn depends upon:

- The purpose of evaluation (audit or learning)
- Context (e.g. topic, level of engagement required)
- Time and resources available

It is likely qualitative methods will be most suited for learning purposes. These might include:

- Reflection sessions
- Interviews
- Focus groups
- Observation
- Case studies (Warburton 2010)

There are many practical guides to evaluation methods and design in the grey literature (e.g. UCL Public Engagement Unit n.d.; Research Councils UK 2011; Participation Cymru n.d.) which could prove useful resources for developing engagement evaluation procedures for committees.

3 METHODOLOGY

Research question: how can the Parliament enable unusual suspects to have an impact on committees?

The research for this project was conducted from June – July 2016, through a placement in SPICe.

This research uses a case study approach to explore committee engagement. Qualitative methods were used: data were collected through 42 semi-structured interviews with those involved, and this was supplemented by document analysis. Speaking to different categories of interviewees allowed for comparison of different perspectives, and triangulation.

3.1 CASE SELECTION

Five cases of committee engagement were selected (with the assistance of parliamentary officials) on the basis that they seemed successful in terms of:

- engaging people who would not have engaged without that activity (i.e. they went beyond the ‘usual suspects’)
- making an impact on committee members in terms of the way they approached the rest of the inquiry (e.g. topic selection, or lines of questioning)
- using innovative approaches

The cases selected were outliers: they each in some way exemplify successful and innovative engagement. Choosing outliers for study is sometimes known as the ‘deviant-case method’ (Gerring 2008, p.655). Outliers can illuminate the object of inquiry (‘good engagement’) by virtue of their difference (Thomas 2011, p.514). This approach can be used to develop explanations for the success of various engagement approaches, and thus draw out best practice.

Implicit in this undertaking is the need to evaluate the success of the engagement in each case, a secondary aim of this research. Simons (2014, p.459) describes this as an ‘evaluation case study’:

An evaluation case study has three essential features: to determine the value of the case, to include and balance different interests and values, and to report findings to a range of stakeholders in ways that they can use.

There were also pragmatic reasons for case selection. All cases were recent (from session four of parliament), so it was possible to access people who were involved, and interviewees would still be able to recall details.

3.2 INTERVIEWS

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with three broad categories of interviewees:

- Parliament officials (from Clerking, Outreach, Education, SPICe, Media, and Web and Online teams)
- MSPs (committee members)
- External participants (witnesses, people who submitted written evidence, and people/organisations otherwise involved)

This allowed for ‘triangulation’ – ‘using more than one method or source of data in the study of social phenomena’ (Bryman 2001, p.274). It was possible to explore the perceptions of all the different parties involved in committee work, to form a balanced view based on all accounts, permitting greater confidence in the research findings.

Interview subjects were selected for their involvement in the cases under study, or their knowledge and experience of committee work generally. Sampling was an iterative process. Initial interviews were carried out as part of a scoping exercise to refine the research question; the next interviews were with the clerks to the committees, who provided an overview of cases, and suggested other potential interviewees. From there, interviewees were identified through ‘snowballing’ (not problematic in this research, as the intention was not to achieve a random sample). Ultimately, the aim was to interview people from every category mentioned above for each case.

Identifying witnesses was the most difficult task (an interesting finding in itself). Necessarily, this depended upon parliament officials or MSPs providing contact details and consent. Some issues included: a lack of organisational memory – contact details were not kept; it was felt it would be inappropriate to contact people for research purposes; or witnesses were vulnerable people who could not participate (e.g. for health reasons). While there is potential for bias here, this was not apparent, and witnesses gave mixed reports of their experiences with no obvious prejudices. It was possible to contact enough external participants to substantiate the case studies.

Semi-structured interviews were used for flexibility, and to allow interviewees freedom to express their views and frame issues themselves. Having some structure also allows for cross-case comparability (Bryman, 2001: 314-5). Before interviews were conducted, existing sources were searched for information (e.g. committee reports and transcripts, news articles); this provided a backdrop to the case, informed questioning, and avoided unnecessary data gathering (Simons, 2014: 461). An interview guide was prepared with topics to cover. Interviews were conducted face-to-face wherever possible; some were by telephone. Interviews were recorded where consent was given. In this report, quotations are anonymised.

3.3 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Most interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data was then transformed into themes that encapsulated the overarching meaning in the data. This was a process of ‘progressive focusing’: sorting, refining, and refocusing data until they made sense (Simons 2014, p.464). Themes and interconnections were then interpreted to generate findings.

3.4 LIMITATIONS

The short timeframe within which the research was conducted was an obvious limitation. All data had to be collected over a period of six weeks. Some people were unavailable due to recess/holidays.

It was a transitional moment for the Parliament, as session five was beginning. Some MSPs from the previous session were no longer in office, so were not available for

interview. There was uncertainty around committees work programmes for coming session. Significant reforms had been made recently within the organisation (notably the introduction of the committee engagement strategy), but people had yet to experience the effect of these changes.

There are some concerns that it is difficult to generalise and make inferences from case studies due to their small sample size. However, it is important to recognise that they are not conceived of as representative samples (Bryman, 2001: 50) (and as one clerk observed, 'there is no such thing as a normal inquiry'. Instead, '[m]aking inferences from cases with a qualitative data set arises more from a process of interpretation in context, appealing to tacit and situated understanding for acceptance of their validity' (Simons 2014, p.465). It is possible to generalise from one case to another, or simply learn from an in-depth exploration of a single case. And as Gerring (2008, p.677) notes, there is 'safety in numbers': cross-case analysis mitigates concerns about representativeness.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 ISSUES

4.1.1 Usual suspects

As the literature suggests, parliament depends on the expertise of ‘usual suspects’. One MSP, speaking about a frequent participant, commented:

He's always good and he's always worth listening to. So even though he's here quite a lot, I don't want to stop him coming. I still want to hear from him.... Because if I didn't hear from him, we'd certainly be worse off.

Instead, the problem centres on those who are absent:

there's an issue with identifying and reaching out to people who perhaps wouldn't necessarily identify themselves as having something to contribute. (Clerk)

These comments highlight the nature of the challenge: identifying stakeholders who are not represented, when parliament’s engagement is necessarily limited to a small part of the population.

4.1.2 Expertise and experience

If the ‘usual suspects’ label is imprecise, a more workable distinction is between expertise and lived experience (although there are grey areas here too – degrees of remove from the ‘front-line’). This heuristic was used by many of the MSPs and officials interviewed.

To hold the government to account, committees rely on: i) external expertise, i.e. individuals and organisations with an understanding of the policy issues at hand (typically ‘usual suspects’); and ii) external experience (from those with direct lived experience relevant to the issue at hand). Together, these two elements form the ‘evidence’ that committees gather:

On the one hand, you're looking for expertise, so you go to groups like the Institute of Fiscal Studies. And on the other hand you're looking for experience, so you go to members of the public. (Clerk)

This distinction between expertise and experience broadly corresponds to the difference between evidence at a national and local level. Expert views (from 'usual suspects') were thought to be necessary in order to get a system-wide perspective:

People can only come and talk about their experience, but you can't base an inquiry on people's experiences... Often when you're talking usual suspects, it's because people have had to get a national overreach, and they need a broader voice, so that when they're writing an inquiry report they can say, 'this is happening in Scotland.'

(Clerk)

Lived experience was seen to supplement the evidence provided by usual suspects. In particular it can illustrate 'front-line' realities of people at the pointy end of policies. However, MSPs and officials saw risks associated with anecdotal evidence, especially the capture of committees by small niche interests:

The danger is you get a small group of people, who say things that you quite like, and you give it more value and weight than it's worth.

(MSP)

These risks can be mitigated through triangulation: combining a high-level perspective with local views, using a range of methods, or taking evidence in different locations (e.g. using rural and urban comparators).

4.1.3 When is broad engagement necessary?

A 'big tent approach' to engagement will not always be necessary. For example, some technical issues require specialist knowledge that most people do not possess, or may not generate public interest (so are impossible to 'sell' at a grassroots level). Many unsuccessful activities referred to by interviewees failed because engagement was undertaken as an 'add-on' without a clear purpose (i.e. for its own sake).

This should not become an excuse, however. Committees should think about where there is scope to go beyond usual suspects. In particular, engagement with the public/service users is important when looking at policy implementation. In fact, one clerk argued that the Parliament's focus on policy development, rather than implementation, was the reason there were few opportunities for the public to participate.

4.1.4 Formal evidence-taking

Witness selection depends on the topic and circumstances, and is guided by the needs of scrutiny ('we're actually looking for the evidence' – Clerk). Preliminary witness lists are usually drawn up prior to the call for evidence. Occasionally witnesses will be invited to give oral evidence on the strength of written submissions; how often this happens varies, but it was uncommon. A clerk pointed out:

the timetabling often means that the call for views influences the questions that are asked, and the content of the report, more than it does the witnesses that appear.

In addition to this limitation, the factors affecting the diversity of committee witnesses identified by Geddes largely hold true for the Scottish Parliament (it may be even more restricted, due to the smaller scale of the country, and the combined functions of its committees, which mean they are often reacting to legislation so have less scope to define the agenda). Moreover, sometimes organisations expect a place at the table, which can pose a dilemma where committees have to choose between maintaining good relationships with external organisations, and selecting witnesses based on their current needs.

Committees therefore do not have an entirely free hand when selecting witnesses, and 'usual suspects' are to be expected. As one clerk observed: 'if you pick witnesses to try to fulfil some kind of criteria... you're on a hiding to nothing.' However, it should be acknowledged that witness selection is a political choice, made by MSPs and informed by clerks. A good illustration of this is the work on the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Bill. Although Parliament as a whole was overwhelmingly

in favour, committee members were chosen to reflect an even balance of views, as were witnesses. This ensured the issue was properly debated (and seen to be debated). On the other hand, representing both sides of an issue equally may not be appropriate if that goes against the balance of evidence and expert opinion (as in the BBC's recent coverage of Brexit) (Johnson 2016).

Formal evidence sessions only represent part of the picture. Other forms of engagement also feed into committee work and can be more important in terms of enabling 'unusual suspects'.

4.1.5 Status of evidence

Some officials felt there was a culture within parliament that privileged certain kinds of evidence over others, particularly formal evidence associated with the standard inquiry model (i.e. written evidence and oral evidence sessions at parliament). There was a concern that other forms of engagement were seen to produce evidence that was less valid, creating a distinction between 'proper evidence' and 'extra evidence':

Engagement is... useful for bringing members on board, for making people feel like they're interacting with committees and with parliament, but when it comes to actual tangible evidence that you can use in a report to make recommendations to the government, it can be quite tricky to use evidence at that kind of level. (Clerk)

Some evidence lends itself to reports (any written summary is easier to reflect upon, and can show how conclusions were reached; numbers are persuasive). But, as one clerk put it, 'stepping back a bit, the direction of travel of that evidence can sometimes be set by a fact-finding visit.' Committee members are influenced by a range of evidence, much of which comes from outside the formal evidence-taking process (e.g. from fact-finding visits or even from their own constituency work). It is for them to interpret and weigh that evidence, and make decisions. As Nutley et al. (2007, p.315) observe, the label 'evidence' is not so much a technical description as a political judgement. Similarly, some officials argued against using the term 'evidence' altogether ('apart from anything else, a lot of people you hear from are effectively lobbyists' – Clerk). Taking this view, according certain kinds of so-called evidence a

higher status than others may not make sense, as ‘informal’ evidence can be just as persuasive to committee members. One clerk argued:

we have to change the approach in terms of valuing evidence from different sources and different mediums, and to my mind that provides a much more dynamic way for the committee to engage and perhaps engage with people on their own terms, as opposed to upskilling them to come along and give evidence to us.

While there are good reasons for the current approach, gearing the inquiry process towards the final report may accentuate the bias towards usual suspects and preclude others from participating.

4.1.6 Lived Experience

As well as being illustrative of realities on the ground, lived experience is valuable because it makes a strong impact on MSPs:

As a politician, testimony, telling a story, is very powerful. In my view, representative politics is at its best if it's rooted in the direct experience of people you're trying to represent.

Lived experience can also take politics out of the equation when committees look at issues that would normally be divisive, as MSPs, officials and witnesses commented. One clerk observed: ‘it's quite hard to be political about issues where people are having a hard time.’ In this way it can help generate cross-party consensus. Equally, it can be effective in ‘open’ areas where little knowledge exists or there is not yet a party line.

In the case studies, engagement was seen to have critically shaped the direction of inquiries:

the fact that we did meet [care experienced young people], and heard that first hand account, changed the direction and the way in which the inquiry took place, I have no doubt about that. (MSP)

A greater recognition of the added value that lived experience can bring to a committee's deliberations may create more space for unusual suspects in the process.

4.1.7 Face-to-face engagement

Face-to-face engagement was generally seen to have a greater impact than written evidence. Most MSPs and officials agreed that this was the case, although some were cautious not to be seen to favour certain types of evidence. Some also commented that lived experience was best communicated in person.

You get a written submission, and everybody's busy, you know.... with the best will in the world you're not going to absorb it all.... Whereas if you're listening to oral evidence it has much more of an impact. (MSP)

Clerks also acknowledged the importance of face-to-face engagement. Some turned the concept on its head, and spoke of engagement as a 'hook' to engage MSPs. For example, one said:

There's a bigger weight to face-to-face... that will stick with a member.... We've had some very difficult issues to talk about in the committee, and people don't always engage with issues until they've spoken with people who've been directly affected.

4.1.8 Evaluation

To date there has been limited evaluation of committee engagement. Officials may informally evaluate engagement activities by asking whether engagement led to a better range of evidence or a stronger report. However, committees have done little to involve those they engage with in evaluation, and when they have, evaluation has tended to focus only on process. Engagement activities are evaluated using feedback forms, but these are fairly generic and designed to flag up issues rather than lead to more significant learning. The following quote from a clerk illustrates some of the challenges in seeking feedback:

There's not really an onus on getting [feedback] and using it. It's a bit of a wasted opportunity I think... I think we go through all the stress of

it, and then we just make our own conclusions... I think if we're honest, sometimes we don't want to open it all up again. I mean if they don't like the committee's report, what can I do?

Interviewees were uncertain about how committee engagement could be meaningfully evaluated (and as one clerk remarked, the problem of evaluation is even broader: 'we're not a business. It's quite an abstract thing to do, democracy. Scrutiny of the government – how do you know if it's successful?'). The reasons cited for this reflect challenges documented in the literature:

- Confusion about the purpose(s) of engagement, and therefore definition(s) of success
- Multiple perspectives (and different ideas of success) within parliament
- Difficulty with measurement (numbers are not good at capturing the quality of engagement)
- Difficulty of ensuring participant satisfaction (and desired outcomes) in a complex political process.
- Difficulty of tracing the impact of engagement:
 - It may have a subtle influence on MSPs, informing lines of questioning or decision-making, without ever being referred to;
 - It may be referred to in speech or reports, but making the connection is time-consuming and impractical
 - Impact on policy outcomes is not always apparent (especially if committees do not follow up recommendations)
 - Sometimes interviewees could point to concrete outcomes
 - Sometimes it was thought the government had acted in response to a committee's report, but it had not acknowledged this
 - Sometimes engagement was in relation to reserved matters.

Some clerks and MSPs felt that committee engagement should be evaluated in terms of its utility to committee members, by committee members, which is probably the standard approach:

the important feedback for us is what members think... that's the test.

(Clerk)

it's really up to the committee members themselves to take a view on whether we feel that we've had enough evidence that's been helpful to us. (MSP)

However, this MSP-centric approach takes no account of the views of external participants (on process or outcomes).

4.1.9 Feedback to participants

Virtually all external participants felt that committees needed to do more in terms of closing the feedback loop. Regardless of actual feedback given, the fact that this perception exists is a problem. Many officials also agreed:

I think that closing the loop, and letting people know what's happened to the evidence that they've given is really important, and I think that's something that we don't do enough; we broadcast it into the ether on twitter, and on our webpage, but we don't actually directly contact people enough. (Clerk)

This was also one of McLaverty and MacLeod's findings (2012). Committees usually get in touch with participants at key intervals in their inquiry work, send them the final report, and thank them for their contributions. There was general agreement that this should be a basic expectation. The approach varies from committee to committee (this may be legitimate, as committees need to communicate with different publics in different ways; equally it may reflect that some are doing it better than others). Clerks pointed to practical challenges to providing more detailed feedback:

I don't think we can always share why a committee didn't go a certain way. It's a group dynamic... there's so many private discussions that happen, and it's different parties, it's not just one party line.

I can't go through each and every person and say, 'you're submission helped inform paragraph 32.' It's difficult. Communication with people,

and keeping them informed, I think is probably the best you can aspire to.

Furthermore, if committees are not following up on recommendations they may not be in a position to report outcomes to participants. While any approach to feedback needs to acknowledge real-life constraints, committees could do more. One Third Sector Interface (TSI) representative suggested that when committees organise engagement through TSIs, they could also provide feedback to participants via the TSI.

4.2 GOOD PRACTICE

Interviewees highlighted a range of good practice and committee innovations. A selection of the most salient are detailed here.

4.2.1 Getting beyond the usual suspects

Using networks, umbrella bodies and TSIs to drill down to unusual suspects

These 'keystone groups' would be considered usual suspects. However, they can put committees in touch with unusual suspects through their contact networks. This allows committees to reach smaller organisations (and eventually service users). In this way, even though committees may still be using a middleman, they can avoid using the same handful, and only speaking to those at the 'top'.

Keystone groups can also act as both aggregators (pulling information together) and amplifiers (pushing information and stimulating multiple groups to engage) (Halpin 2011, p.222). For example, the European Committee worked with NIDOS to communicate with its member organisations. By proactively building a relationship with the umbrella body (as opposed to just informing), the committee was able to successfully promote its inquiry, receiving over 40 submissions from member organisations, including 15-20 from small or medium sized organisations. This compared favourably to past efforts: '[i]t was almost as if people responded more to somebody they perceived more as their peer, rather than a Scottish Government agency.'

Working with intermediaries to access 'hard-to-reach' groups

In some cases it will not be possible for committees to engage directly with certain groups, and they will need to use the expertise of intermediaries, typically from the third sector:

As a parliament, to some extent we just have to accept we are at the centre, and we are dependent on these other groups. They are doing outreach work, really getting to the grassroots. (MSP)

The case studies provide successful examples of collaboration (e.g. with *Scottish Association for Mental Health* to engage with people with mental illness, and with *Who Cares? Scotland (WC?S)* to engage with care experienced young people). The risk is that intermediaries can act as a filter:

stakeholders have particular issues or ideas that they want to promote, and if they're working their evidence around that, that's something you might want to be aware of. (Clerk)

However, some groups may be difficult to reach in any other way. If committees are aware of this issue, this can go some way towards mitigating the possibility of capture, as can triangulation. Committees should also question organisations' claims to represent others, and their internal democratic processes (for a discussion of representative and solidarity functions of organisations see Halpin 2006). When working with WC?S, for example, the committee felt comfortable it was 'an organisation that is very much in tune with the people they are working with' (MSP).

Making the most of public interest

While some issues are unlikely to generate much public interest, there are others where there is a lot of potential for engagement (and publicity). The 'Your Say' initiative relied almost entirely on public interest: anger about work capability assessments and other welfare issues motivated people to contact the committee and 'see it through', and targeted media advertising was very effective. While these circumstances are unique, it is conceivable that this model could be used in other areas.

The caveat here is that engaging with the public only on hot topics may preclude engagement on other issues, which will never fall into the 'hot topic' category. This is where engagement at an agenda-setting stage would be valuable to push other issues up the agenda.

4.2.2 Barriers and supporting measures

Language

Many officials felt that the quasi-judicial language used by parliament was a barrier to engagement (and also questioned its technical validity), especially the terms 'evidence' and 'witness.' Some clerks thought the terms so off-putting they had taken to avoiding them in public communications and invitations. 'Evidence-taking' implies interrogation, extracting information from witnesses, which, in addition to sending the wrong message, may not reflect the real nature of proceedings. Committee witnesses made the same criticisms, pointing out negative connotations.

Setting

Committee sessions at parliament can be daunting (as external participants observed), partly due to committee rooms themselves. These are formal and adversarial, with obtrusive audio-visual recording equipment and an audience gallery; they also have rules and procedures that are obscure to anyone unfamiliar with parliament. These 'invited spaces', created and controlled top-down by parliament, can pose barriers to engagement. For this reason, some committees went out to meet people 'on their own turf' first, before inviting them to parliament, where MSPs could prompt witnesses to share stories they had heard previously.

Spaces are not static, however, and can be changed (one of the advantages of holding external meetings is that it forces a reconfiguration) (Escobar 2011, p.59). An innovative example from the case studies was the European Committee's international development event. This was originally planned as an external fact-finding mission, but subsequently it was decided to use parliament as the venue for economy and convenience. This resulted in a hybrid meeting format ('like a roundtable but better'). The committee room was set-up differently to

accommodate guest presentations and a workshop, and a transcript was produced. This created a better atmosphere for discussion.

On and off the record

In terms of a record of engagement, officials and MSPs felt there should be a balance between recorded and private meetings. On one hand, a record was seen as important for transparency and openness ('it is right that people giving evidence on a formal basis are subject to scrutiny of the views they hold' – MSP); members also want to be able to quote powerful evidence, and use media exposure to put issues into the spotlight. On the other hand, private meetings are typically more conducive to dialogue, and less daunting for non-professional witnesses:

You get far more from a private meeting in general than you do from an official, public committee meeting. The reason being is that when people are being filmed, and question – answer – question – answer... it's very artificial, and as a result, people are perhaps a bit more constrained, cagey, cautious about what they say, will give the official line. (Clerk)

There are also practical considerations around producing a record. The benefit of formal evidence sessions in parliament is that rooms are set up for this, and meetings are sequenced in a manageable way. Recording proceedings outside of parliament is more complicated. One clerk remarked: 'I suspect the reason that people aren't experimenting with it is because they might perceive it to be more work. And it is.'

The Education and Culture Committee's (ECC) work with care experienced young people demonstrates the value of private meetings, which can enable vulnerable groups to contribute (and can be a stepping stone to giving evidence in formal sessions). Similarly, the Welfare Reform Committee (WRC) used a suite of methods for taking evidence, including options for people to contribute anonymously or without visiting parliament:

There are people who are too vulnerable to appear in front of a committee; individuals, and certain groups, and there is something

you need to be able to offer them, and you need to be able to offer committees, in terms of getting evidence from them. (Clerk)

Supporting witnesses to give evidence

Although both the ECC and WRC made use of private meetings, they also aimed to support people to give evidence formally and on record:

*Part of thing about 'Your Say' was actually getting it on the record....
And to do that you have to work with people, you have to make them comfortable in that situation. (Clerk)*

While giving evidence in front of a committee in the usual way should not necessarily be considered the 'top trump', in these cases it worked well. The 'Your Say' initiative was notable for how clerks and others prepared vulnerable people to give evidence, and provides a good model to follow. The ECC also did this well, by seeking help from WCFS, who supported care experienced young people to give evidence. WCFS, while emphasising the importance of safeguarding, were strongly of the opinion that people could be empowered to speak for themselves.

Several external participants commented that giving evidence in groups (as a witness panel, for example) made the experience less intimidating:

what made it possible for those people was the fact that we were all together.... I think it works when you go as a group, because there's strength in that group.

However, one clerk advised caution: 'if you have three or four people giving evidence together... they tend to gravitate towards a common consensus.'

Format of evidence

Many officials commented that committees invariably expected (and requested) submissions 'on two sides of A4'. There are practical reasons for this (as one MSP observed, 'you can't skim read a video'). However, it was felt that parliament could be more flexible about format, and make it clearer that alternatives are possible.

Alternative formats can be very effective, as one case study illustrates. At the ECC's stakeholder event some young people performed a play based on their experiences of care. Interviewees commented on how powerful this was:

it enabled us as officials to see things differently, and it enabled members to see things differently, that four people sitting at the end of a committee table isn't always going to be your be-all and end-all, in terms of committee evidence.

4.2.3 Effective engagement

External committee activities need be relevant to local people

Officials emphasised that for external committee activities to be successful (if only in terms of attendance) they have to be relevant to the local people and local area. Many cited examples of unsuccessful engagement where the issues had no importance to locals. This is one problem with coupling committee activities to Parliament Days, because other considerations about location come into play:

The determination on venue wasn't really about the grainy stuff of who you would get to speak to, it was also about backdrop, and what would look good. (MSP)

By contrast, where engagement was perceived to have worked well, it was due to getting the location right. For example, the Economy, Energy, and Tourism Committee's (EETC) workshop at Parliament Day Paisley on the quality of work was suited to the local area; similarly, the Equal Opportunities Committee's (EOC) visits to Islay and Easterhouse were successful because social isolation was a relevant issue for those places.

Piggyback on existing activities

Engagement is often more effective if it taps into existing activities, rather than creating new activity (it is not necessary to 'reinvent the wheel'). Officials observed that it results in better conversations, and that people feel safe in their own environment. The EOC's visit to Islay is a good example. With help from the local TSI, the committee were able to attend a ceilidh organised by a local ceilidh club, where

they met a wide range of people of all ages ('absolutely unusual suspects'). Participants commented that it was the committee's flexibility and willingness to fit in that made the visit successful.

Timing

Engagement is most effective at an early stage, when there is more room for influence – a common theme in the literature (Nicholson 2005, p.38). As mentioned previously, engagement can often frame the issues and set the direction of an inquiry.

However, the short timeframes for inquiries present a challenge, as meaningful engagement requires time and preparation (the EOC's Islay visit, for example, benefited from a long lead-in). Clerks observed that it takes time to get past usual suspects and find 'the right people', and that when done in a rush engagement can become 'tick-box'. One reflected:

It's really important to give yourself some time to explore and then come back. We're against time pressure... but I think you need to build some room for additions and responses, responses to what you hear from people.

Build on-going relationships

One way to build room for engagement in the face of time pressures is to have a running start. As one clerk observed, 'it's really important to engage with key groups all the time, not just wait for an inquiry or a bill, but to have a good idea and impression of people who are out there.'

For example, the ECC built an on-going relationship with WC?S, which enabled the committee to develop its expertise and knowledge. Interviewees noted that, somewhat fortuitously, initial inquiry work set the committee up to then scrutinise the 'Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill': when this came before committee, members were already fully engaged with the lived experience of care experienced young people. Furthermore, WC?S subsequently went on to support young people to give evidence to other committees. This led an official to observe: 'Engagement isn't just a one off static event.... These people are not only qualified to talk about

their experiences of being in care, they've got insights to give in other pieces of work as well.'

Similarly, the WRC was able to take advantage of previous engagement work to identify new avenues for future inquiries. It also built relationships with witnesses, who could be called upon to share their experiences in future work.

4.2.4 Deliberative participation

Public participation in policymaking

On spectrums of public participation, parliament's engagement would rarely go beyond 'consultation'. However, there are opportunities to involve the public to a greater degree, as evidenced by two examples from the case studies. In each, participants were asked to come up with policy recommendations:

- The WRC ran a workshop at parliament with previous 'Your Say' witnesses. This was designed to inform a new set of committee members about key social security issues, in preparation for the coming session (and thus indirectly helped to set the agenda)
- The ECC's stakeholder event at parliament brought together care professionals (service providers) and care experienced people (service users), and asked them to come with solutions to improve the lives of young people in care.

Dialogue and deliberation

The two examples above went further than simply asking people to share experiences, and took advantage of the possibilities of dialogue and deliberation. Participants and officials remarked on how well this had worked:

It wasn't so much a question and answer, going from politician to public, but actually public to public, and politician – public – public. So it was a very good interchange, in that respect. (Participant)

Scepticism and opportunities

There were considerable reservations about the merits of public participation among interviewees (understandably so). This was due to concerns about:

- Citizen competence ('it's probably a big ask for a lot of people, to expect them to come up with detailed policy recommendations' – MSP).
- Legitimacy: unelected citizens should not have influence on policy decisions; MSPs want control of recommendations.

With regard to the first point, the two events were acknowledged to have produced robust recommendations and led to concrete policy outcomes. In both cases, participants were the (experiential) experts in relation to the MSPs. In response to concerns about legitimacy, it should be pointed out that public participation processes always have a link to elected representatives, who can make final decisions. They are also top-down (i.e. devised by parliament), so can be designed to be representative, and include marginalised people, unorganised interests or latent public interests (Warren 2009). Citizens are also capable of representing other citizens, and not just their own narrow interests. For example, WC?S said the following of an inquiry:

the beauty of that piece of work – every single young person that took part – none of them will benefit from that legislative change at all.

Agenda-setting

Committees have experimented very little with public participation at an agenda-setting stage. Several officials thought parliament should explore the possibility of involving external publics in this respect. Members of the public can make suggestions via the public petition system; however, this lacks the benefits that come from structured dialogue and deliberation.

The exception has been the EOC, which held some informal meetings with stakeholders to try to identify issues needing attention. While this is an innovative approach, it should be recognised that access here may confer influence, and accentuate bias towards usual suspects – it is important to think about who is at the table.

4.3 ORGANISATION

4.3.1 Joined-up working

Parliament has been moving towards a more joined-up way of working among teams, in line with the Committee Engagement Strategy. How this will work in practice remains to be seen, but in principle it is a very positive change. Many officials interviewed felt that in the past engagement had often been undertaken as an 'add-on', in order to fulfil requirements or to be seen to have engaged. Engagement was perceived to be separate from the evidence-taking process (whereas this report takes the view that evidence-taking is an element of engagement). When approached in this way, engagement can become tokenistic, and counter-productive: if people are asked for their views, but these are not used, it leads to cynicism about the process. On the other hand, treating engagement as a core activity, and involving all relevant teams early in the process, should result in a more considered approach, and add value to committee work.

4.3.2 Sharing best practice

On a similar note, many officials felt that committees have tended to work in silos, and as a result have missed opportunities to share best practice and innovations:

One of the things we're not good at is spreading the information about what we've done, and what worked, what didn't... (Clerk)

How this could be done is up to officials, but it could be through meetings, training sessions, cross-pollination with other teams, or documents. Legacy and Convenors' reports are one option, but as these are public documents they are not designed to be used by practitioners, and lack detail.

4.3.3 Contact management

Parliament to some extent lacks institutional memory, particularly its committees. Turnover in membership and staff means that knowledge and expertise are lost, as are contacts and relationships (which are managed on a committee by committee basis). One clerk remarked:

We do try to keep contacts where we can, but we don't have anymore than that, it's just an email address and a person. Someone else has to then start it again.

Many officials felt that a parliament-wide contact management system was necessary. This is something currently under consideration. In addition to other benefits, it would have implications for engagement in terms of:

- Tracking audiences (i.e. being aware of who committees had engaged with in the past, and who the 'usual suspects' are)
- Building relationships to support committee work

5 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In light of the findings of this research, this report sets out the following recommendations for the Parliament:

1. Continue moving towards joined-up working, in line with the Committee Engagement Strategy. How this works should be assessed periodically.
2. Build on the wealth of good practice documented in this report and elsewhere, and consider mechanisms for sharing innovations and learning.
3. Consider developing a more systematic approach for tracking audiences: a contact management system.
4. Develop an evaluation programme for committee engagement. This should involve evaluation of both processes and outcomes (especially impact on policy and policymakers), and take into account the views of those engaging and being engaged. Possible methods include focus groups and interviews. Committees should seek feedback from participants on their reports and other outputs as standard.
5. Look for opportunities to further involve the public in deliberation, agenda-setting, and consensus building, particularly in politically divisive or open areas. Some committees are already setting precedents for this, which could provide models.
6. Address the perception that committees do not do enough to close the feedback loop. Following up on recommendations and keeping in touch with contacts is important here.

In conclusion, this report has identified many examples of thoughtful and innovative practices designed to overcome challenges around inclusion and to support scrutiny. By documenting these, the hope is to make a contribution to incremental improvements in the work of committees. There are many opportunities ahead for the Parliament, and a determination among its staff and members to live up to the promise of its guiding principles.

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