

Commission on Parliamentary Reform

Inverness Evening Event

30 January 2017

We asked: What approach to engage with the Parliament best suits you?

At Table 1, you said:

Mini Publics

- There was concern raised about how effectively 'mini publics' could appoint people that accurately reflected a cross section of society. This is due to the time commitment people would have to make to be part of one. This could deter people with responsibilities (parents, carers etc.) or who face other barriers from being represented.
- The decisions made by "mini publics" particularly when it concerns budgeting may not always reflect the wishes of the budget holders. The budget holders may have access to knowledge and information that would otherwise not be available to the public that could influence decision making. Therefore 'mini publics' would have to be sufficiently supported to be able to make informed decisions. This of course has cost and resource implications.
- "Mini publics" could be a solution to the 'usual suspects' Committees often hear from.

Written views

- Having the opportunity to take your time to compose a detailed and informed response to inquiries and bills is more important than being able to make an immediate response.
- Being able to submit your opinions anonymously can allow for a more frank and honest dialogue.
- Due to the workloads of MSPs it was accepted it would be unlikely they would have time to read every single submission made to a Committee, especially with high profile inquiries. Therefore you were placing a certain degree of trust in the staff to accurately interpret your views and pass them onto the MSPs.
- You can collect a much wider range of views via written evidence than from other methods as it is less resource and time intensive for people write to a committee than for a committee to use other methods, such as oral evidence.
- To be able to ensure everyone is aware they are able to submit their written views it is important for Parliament to sufficiently advertise this which requires resources. There was a feeling that by "tweeting" about a call for evidence Parliament felt the promotion was done. Many people were not even aware they could provide written evidence; therefore more resource is required to allow more people to engage this way.
- Committees and MSPs require sufficient support to be able to properly analyse and respond to written evidence. There was a mix of views regarding the level of feedback people would expect. Some felt they would prefer to have a more detailed response explaining how their submission has directly influenced the Committee's recommendations, whilst appreciating the resource implications of this. There was a suggestion that when submitting

written views people could tick a box indicating they wanted a detailed response, potentially reducing the impact of this on Committee workloads.

Oral evidence

- The group expressed the importance of face to face communication, and the benefit of Parliament speaking to people about issues that affect them where they live. The feeling of actually being listened to and valued is really important as the other methods of engagement can make it more difficult for your voice to be heard.
- There was a feeling that people are taken more at face value when talking directly to each other, and this can make the engagement more impactful.

Social Media

- The level of detail you can give on a subject can be limited by the method of social media you use. Sometimes you are limited to just a couple of sentences. This can make it difficult to properly express yourself.
- There were concerns raised about the level of privacy for comments made using the different social media platforms. By commenting on a website, blog post etc. you are opening yourself up to responses from anyone. It might also stop you from providing sometimes very personal anecdotes to Parliament if you know anyone can read them.

Focus Groups

- Concerns were raised about the practicality of people taking part in focus groups. People live increasingly busy lives and don't necessarily have time to take part in a focus group. Therefore they may find it more convenient to engage with Parliament using other methods.
- The costs attributed to running focus groups for example covering peoples loss of earnings, should not be the overriding decision on whether one takes place. It is really important in some topic areas, such as health, to collect views using this method.

Other views expressed

- There was a feeling expressed that MSPs have a relatively low visual profile amongst people in their constituency, and that people only really go and see their MSP if they have a problem. This can create the impression that they are not really there to represent them in the Parliament.
- It was felt that there is a general lack of awareness of how Parliament actually works, and where to find information of what Parliament does. For example where to find out what inquiries Committees are currently undertaking and how to get involved.

Summary of views

- It was agreed by the group that face-to-face and written views were the most valued forms of engagement.
- However all options have their positives and should be used depending on the situation and costs.

At Table 2, you said:

- The level of political influence over the engagement process decreases with the increased use of participative engagement techniques.
- Without appropriate support, some groups would not be able to respond to written evidence or fully contribute to fact finding visits.
- It is vital mini publics are representative of wider society.
- It is vital focus groups are well facilitated and accessible. Accessible in terms of people with disabilities or special needs being able to physically attend, as well as accessible in terms of the language and processes used being able to be generally understood by a non-professional.
- In the light of digital poverty, digital engagement should be used to compliment other forms of engagement, rather than being used exclusively.
- As some groups in society use social media more extensively than others, again, it should be used to compliment other forms of engagement.
- The Parliament should make it clearer to respondents where their (and others') written evidence has been published.
- The format of committee evidence sessions – uncomfortable and formal – was discussed.
- The Parliament should provide feedback to those who provide evidence about how this has influenced the Committee.
- The difference between short term and sustainable engagement was highlighted.
- There can be a need for capacity building to support effective engagement.
- A mini public would be useful to develop ideas, with further work done by focus groups to develop specific ideas, might be a good model.
- The group's first choice for an engagement model was a mini public.

At Table 3, you said:

Opinion of the Parliament

- Effective at its job (2).¹
- Feels distant (1).
- Does not make itself as widely known as the Scottish Government (1).

Views on digital media

- The young people did not know that the Parliament had a website.
- Digital media is a good form of communication for 10-16, or 9/10 to 25 year olds as young people can rule out a lot of forms of participation, for instance they would not get selected for “juries” (4+).
- Twitter may be better than Facebook for people aged 25+ (1).
- It should not be assumed that all young people can be reached through social media – some do not use it for privacy reasons (1) while others only use it for family events (1).
- One participant asked if individual MSPs had Facebook pages and suggested they may be able to communicate better with young people if they had one.
- The Parliament should bear in mind that young people are aware many alerts/messages allegedly from well-known organisations are scams and may not trust a message that appears to be from the Parliament.
- Suggestions included:
 - Using group chats on Skype to communicate with young people, perhaps with different age groups to ensure a diversity of opinions.
 - Having a regional/local Parliament Facebook page that would flag up all the events in Parliament that may affect the area.
 - Paying websites like Facebook to “highlight” or “bump events up” so people would see it more prominently.
 - The possibility of subscribing to the Government/Parliament’s websites to receive updates on particular topics.
 - Identifying the top 5 Twitter accounts in parliament (presumably MSPs’ or others’ accounts) in terms of visits and retweets, and encourage those account users to tweet about particular issues/bills (1).
 - Sharing Parliament events/bills on other organisations’ pages that people receive notifications e.g. if Police Scotland shared a link to a parliamentary issue, all members of Police Scotland Youth Volunteers would see it (4+).

¹ Numbers in brackets correspond to the number of participants who made the point or were in agreement with it. 4+ is 4 or more.

Views on fact finding

- Appropriate for some issues more than others e.g. localised issues.

Views on mini-publics

- Along with digital media, mini-publics were the preferred form of communication.
- Should be used carefully as they are expensive and may divert money away from resolving an issue that is already known.²
- Face-to-face may be better than digital forms of communication (2).
- Important that MSPs from different parties be present (1).
- Better for MSPs to come to the people rather than the people go down to Holyrood (4+).
- Mini-publics would make people more relaxed than giving oral evidence and the Parliament “may get more out of” participants in mini-publics (1).
- Mini-publics are a good way:
 - To get a broad range of opinions (more so than focus groups).
 - To reach out to members of disadvantaged communities e.g. people without permanent accommodation as well as people with language barriers or literacy/sensory impairments.
 - For people to support each other in expressing their views, particularly if they have been in a similar position/had similar issues (1).
 - For people to discover different parties’ perspectives and have a broader change of views which may affect their opinion (1).
- One young person suggested that mini-publics be organised between MSPs and specifically young people in order for the latter to better share their views.

Views on focus groups

- May not provide a representative opinion.
- A lot of local communities already run groups where people meet to discuss local issues and then communicate them to Government e.g. in the Western Isles (1).

Views on oral evidence

- Can feel uncomfortable, daunting and requires a lot of confidence (4+).
- Young people may find it easier to give evidence in the Parliament if they were going to Holyrood as a group e.g. from their school but would not necessarily ask an adult to take them down to give oral evidence themselves (4+).
- Parliamentary feedback is very important and is felt to be insufficient e.g. in the voluntary sector (1).
- It’s easy to receive commitments from MSPs without anything ever happening afterwards.

² One participant asked the cost of each meeting and the majority expressed surprise at the cost.

Views on written evidence

- Often felt to be ineffective (1).
- Feedback to written evidence is felt to be very important yet was felt to be insufficient e.g. in the voluntary sector (1).
- Providing written evidence may incur a cost to the person (1).

Further suggested methods of communication

- Postal letters specifically addressed to young people (1).
- Door-to-door communication or group meetings may be better than digital communication for adults, particularly groups with mobility constraints (4+).
- MSP visits to schools (4+) – young people said they had never received a visit from a MSP in their school.
- When asked whether an announcement in school would be useful, participants agreed but noted it may be problematic if the issue is local as some students are in different catchment areas.
- A good way to make information known for members of the voluntary sector would be through the third sector interface and their member organisations who could communicate it to their own members through their newsletters (1).
- MSPs could visit local areas and describe issues to people who could then go and speak about them themselves to young people in schools.

Further comments

- It is important to hear from MSPs of all parties, not just one (4+).
- Often people feel that the Government does things but people don't know why (4+).
- Some local issues are apparent to people e.g. under-used cycle paths on the A9 but do not appear to be known to Government/Parliament (3)

Summary

- All forms of communication should be considered as the appropriateness of a given form may depend on the issue at hand.
- Social media good for young people but it should not be assumed that all young people use social media.
- Media-publics popular but concern over the cost, particularly to discuss issues that were already known.
- Providing oral evidence can be daunting.
- Direct contact with MSPs was a good way of providing different viewpoints.

At Table 4, you said:

Written views

This approach is good for allowing indepth feedback and time to give a considered response. It also allows individuals to contribute as part of a group and allows a degree of anonymity.

- Some groups meet monthly and may not have enough time to meet a 6 week deadline for evidence. If groups don't write then may be excluded altogether.
- It can be difficult for groups to reach consensus on some issues and which can limit what is said
- Many people are excluded from the process due to poor literacy skills
- Voluntary organisations have limited time to draft a written submission
- Do MSPs have time to read everything? It was felt that you were relying on others to precise – are the current skill levels good enough?

Oral evidence

Experience within the group was varied but most found the experience difficult. One person had been involved in the whole process of a bill and found a protracted process more useful than only one input.

- Very intimidating for vulnerable groups
- Some MSPs seemed to use the committee evidence sessions for party point scoring
- Parliament needs to train good facilitators
- It was more effective and less intimidating to go out to communities
- Little support for individuals taking part
- No feedback given unless asked for
- Some wouldn't do it again
- More choice should be given to individuals/groups according to the situation about the best method of giving evidence

Fact Finding

This was considered a good way of getting more people involved.

- It is most likely to attract people with strong views
- Needs good facilitators
- Needs good preparation in advance of meeting
- Depends how 'local' it is whether a representative groups will take part
- Video conferencing can help reach more people but is dependent on good facilitators and good connectivity.
- Multiple meetings in one location at different times would be good to allow all groups to take part.
- Time spent on fact finding can mean less time spent on constituency work

Suggestion:

Committee members split up to cover more areas – at least 2 MSPs from different parties on each fact finding trip

Mini-publics

This approach would allow a more diverse group to take part – not just usual suspects and groups.

- It may be difficult to get a representative group as some people won't want to take part.
- The more local the issue the more people are likely to want to be involved
- Effectiveness will depend on how well informed the people taking part are

Focus Groups

Allows a more personal approach

- Dependent on how well informed people are
- Difficult to ensure truly representative of a community as some groups less likely to take part

Social media

Main advantage is it can be wide reaching. However

- Tends to give polarised views
- Some people fear intimidation or unfair public criticism

Suggestion:

Have a period (a month?) when there is no plenary business and MSPs can focus on fact finding/focus groups/mini-publics

- Needs to be locally appropriate
- May have implications for working patterns of Parliament staff – unfavourable?

Summary

Over all there were mixed views about what the best methods are. There was agreement that all methods have value and consideration should be given to all in each circumstance.

- Fact finding good for particular issues and communities
- Focus groups are valuable for exploring issues in depth
- Mini-publics are untested but worth piloting
- Social media should be used when appropriate to widen opportunity and raise awareness but not as sole method of engagement
- Written and oral evidence is valuable but many people are inhibited by the formality and language skills required.

The key to all effective engagement is well trained facilitators.

