

## **Commission on Parliamentary Reform**

### **Inclusion Scotland consultation event – Monday 13 March**

#### **Notes of discussions**

**We asked: What are your views of the Scottish Parliament and how can it better represent disabled people?**

**You said:**

The following groups discussed—

#### **Group 1— (Lorna and Emma)**

- **Accessibility** – Views differed amongst group participants. One participant had engaged with a range of MSPs on a number of issues and felt the Scottish Parliament and its members were very accessible. They felt the “Parliament meets you half way” and was very supportive to individuals who want to engage. Other participants, with less experience of engaging, felt there were practical barriers around physical accessibility as well as people lacking the confidence to engage and not wanting to “waste their MSP’s time”. The value of the Scottish Parliament travelling to meet disabled people, rather than disabled people travelling to Holyrood, was highlighted.
- **Representation** – All participants felt it was important for disabled people to be better represented in the Scottish Parliament in order for there to be a better understanding of their life experiences. It was agreed the voice of disabled people was not heard as much as it should be. A range of options were discussed. The group explored the option of a small number of MSPs being elected to represent specific groups and champion their needs. These MSPs would be non-political.
- **Information** – The availability of information about the Scottish Parliament was discussed. It was felt information should be made easily available, in a form accessible to disabled people.
- **Constituency and list MSPs** – It was agreed there is confusion (even lack of knowledge) about list MSPs and a view “they do keep their head down”.
- **Capacity** – It was felt there should be more MSPs (on the basis single constituency MSPs have a heavy constituency workload and additional MSPs should address this). There was no support for a second chamber.

## **Group 2— (Pam and Paul)**

- Awareness and information – There is a general lack of awareness in the Scottish Parliament of the language, educational and disability barriers stopping people from engaging with the Parliament. Unless you know what Parliament is looking it can be very hard to get involved and have your voice heard. For example, it would be beneficial to hear more about the petitions the Parliament is considering, especially if there is a cause that impacts disabled peoples day to day lives. Parliament should pay more attention to the accessibility and language of reports, for example providing an easy read version of all Committee reports. It was recommended Parliament should set up an Access Unit with responsibility for advising all Committees to ensure there is a standard approach.
- Engagement – When engaging with the Parliament you have to proactively chase feedback to see how you have impacted policy decisions. Engagement with Parliament tends to be very one sided for example when engaging on social media you tend not to receive a direct response. Often when committees invite disabled people to give their views it tends to be on bills directly affecting them. However, all legislation impacts their lives, for example the Budget, therefore Committees should do more to engage disabled people on all legislative considerations.
- Accessibility – There was a general consensus that general accessibility to the Parliament was good. However, concerns were raised about the availability of disabled parking near the Parliament. There are only a small number of parking spaces directly opposite the Parliament and these and fill up very quickly. Therefore, to enable easier travel to the Parliament more parking facilities should be provided for disabled people. There are also public transport issues when traveling to Parliament with only a couple of buses going past the building.
- Representation – all in the group felt strongly there should be an organisation similar to the Scottish Youth Parliament and Scottish Older People’s Assembly representing the aims and ambitions of disabled people in Scotland which can directly feed into and influence Government policy. The barriers that prevent disabled people from becoming MSPs and lead to the lack of representation was discussed. The Parties should to more to encourage and support disabled people into politics. Parliament should look into the prospect of job sharing for MSPs as often disabled people are unable to work full time therefore restricting their ability to become an MSP.

### **Group 3— (John and IS)**

- Identity – There is a general confusion between the identities of the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government. References to “Holyrood” and the change to Scottish Government from Scottish Executive can make it difficult to distinguish between them. There was a feeling the Civil Service get blamed for what Ministers do.
- Engagement – Some of the group have engaged with the Parliament through Cross Party Groups which has been a positive experience. Others have attended events held at the Parliament and sat in the Chamber during FMQs, however they had a mixed experience as they were asked to sit in a particular seat which was not suitable for them. There is a general lack of feedback when responding to committee consultations, not sure what happens to the recommendations they make. It can also be difficult to find information about how to give evidence and when it is being considered by a committee.
- Accessibility – The Scottish Parliament and MSPs are far more accessible than Westminster and MPs. However, the Scottish Parliament can do more. Holding more committee meetings outwith Parliament, and properly advertising them, will help more disabled people get involved as it is not always practical to visit the Parliament. Often when discussing accessibility the focus tends to be on physical access, however focus should also be paid to other accessibility needs, such as access to information.
- Information – The website can be difficult to navigate as there is a lot of information on it. Prefer to get the information from organisations such as Inclusion Scotland who present it in a more accessible way. The Parliament shouldn't be erecting barriers to information. Social media can be a useful way to get information regarding what is going on that week. Some of the documents Parliament produces can be difficult for blind people to use as they cannot scan through documents to find the relevant bits.
- Representation – Similar to the 50/50 shortlists parties use to increase the number of female MSPs there should be a similar method used to increase the number of disabled people in the Scottish Parliament. More support needs to be provided to disabled people to allow them to stand, similar to what Inclusion Scotland is doing for the Local Elections. Some felt the approach should be more encouragement and support rather than positive discrimination.

**We asked: What three recommendations would you recommend the Commission consider during its deliberations.**

**You said—**

Group 1 put forward the following suggestions—

- Non-party representatives of specific groups should be elected.
- Better communication with different communities, perhaps using a TV campaign.
- A disability ‘champion’ or office to “take Tarzan through the jungle”.

Group 2 put forward the following suggestions—

- Formation of a Disabled People’s Assembly, which will report annually to the Scottish Parliament.
- Improved access to the parliament/parliamentary process through:
  - MSPs acting as a link between parliament and disabled people in their constituency, maintaining a list of disabled people’s contact details and consulting them/passing on information on relevant issues;
  - An access element to all committee reports; and
  - MSP surgeries on Facebook Live.
- Greater inclusion of disabled people in the party selection process for candidates and special advisers.

Group 3 put forward the following suggestions—

- Better communication about how the Scottish Parliament works but for the information provided to focus on ‘quality, not quantity’, ie, be succinct and concise rather than lengthy and ‘waffley’.
- A ‘champion’ for disability people’s rights.
- Better training for SPS and MSP staff to develop their understanding of disability rights.
- Better disability access to the public gallery.
- A standard way for committees to consult for written evidence and all consultations to be promoted in a single place.
- Better advertising of outreach visits to local communities.

During the discussion between the three groups which followed, it was suggested nine (one for each of the protected characteristics) non-party representatives of specific groups could be elected. It was recognised that there couldn’t be recognition for every minority group. Job sharing and an access fund to provide for information to be provided in other formats were also raised.