

GoWell Panel response to the Commission on Parliamentary Reform issued by the Scottish Parliament

GoWell is a longitudinal research and learning programme that has been investigating the impact of investment in housing, regeneration and neighbourhood renewal in Glasgow on the health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities since 2006.

GoWell researchers and a Panel of 18 citizens from the GoWell study areas co-designed seven community workshops to share evidence about regeneration, strengthening a mutual capacity to understand and influence neighbourhood renewal as part of improving wellbeing.

This commission on Parliamentary Reform is welcomed, as is the opportunity to respond to its questions. This response has focused on the first three questions in the call for written views and has been based on workshop materials documenting the GoWell Panel's experience of engaging with the Scottish Parliament's Local Government and Regeneration Committee in January-February 2016.

1. Has the Scottish Parliament engaged effectively with the people of Scotland so far? Has it engaged better with some groups or on some issues better than others? What are the reasons or evidence for your views?

The GoWell Panel attended a Local Government and Regeneration Committee meeting at the Scottish Parliament on 20 January 2016. In advance of the meeting, the Committee's clerks posted brochures to the GoWell Panel, so that Panel members could learn more about the role of the Scottish Parliament and its committees.

Based on their experience, the GoWell Panel understands that the Scottish Parliament is open to visits from community groups and that tickets are available to the public, free of charge. The GoWell Panel acknowledged good practice, such as the availability of free wheelchair reservation, and that taxis were permitted to park near the main entrance to allow easy access for people with limited mobility. The reception team, security staff and clerks were friendly and welcoming towards the GoWell Panel, which helped them feel comfortable in the building.

Staff manning the entrance to the Committee room were proactively helpful towards GoWell Panel members, for example hanging up coats for those who needed assistance. Visitor Services had also arranged for the wheelchair user in the GoWell Panel to have an aisle seat to facilitate easy access.

As a result of attending the Committee's meeting, GoWell Panel members appreciated the importance of attending the Scottish Parliament to watch and understand how it endeavours to hold Scottish Government to account. Some GoWell Panel members have reported that they have an increased interest in politics since their visit.

2. What has been your experience of direct engagement with the Scottish Parliament?

Please see the response to the previous question.

As a result of the GoWell Panel's visit to the Scottish Parliament, the Clerk to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee attended a GoWell Panel workshop in Glasgow on 19 February 2016 to discuss the Committee's approaches to community engagement. This workshop featured positive, constructive two-way dialogue between the GoWell Panel and the Clerk about strengthening the Committee's community engagement. The GoWell Panel appreciated the Clerk's efforts to visit them in Glasgow and found it helpful to learn about his team's role in supporting the Committee. The GoWell Panel also found it helpful to learn about the distinction between the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government.

3. How can the Scottish Parliament increase and improve its engagement with the people of Scotland, especially those who are less likely to be interested in the Parliament?

Please see responses to the two previous questions.

The response to this question has been based on workshop materials which captured a two-way dialogue between the GoWell Panel and the Senior Clerk to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee on 19 February 2016.

Firstly, the Scottish Parliament's engagement with the people of Scotland does not necessarily concern perceived levels of citizens' 'interest' – the GoWell Panel would say it is more helpful to focus on removing barriers which can prevent people engaging. The GoWell Panel identified several recommendations to increase engagement with the people of Scotland, particularly among communities experiencing inequalities characterised by poverty and the economy, chronic health conditions, disability, and disadvantage relating to social or economic factors. By community we adopt the definition endorsed by the National Standards for Community Engagement, meaning "people united by at least one common characteristic, including geography, identity or shared interests"¹.

The GoWell Panel thought the cost and time involved in travelling to the Scottish Parliament could be a barrier to people, even if tours and public tickets for committee meetings are free. The GoWell Panel also found that travelling to the Scottish Parliament could be exhausting for disabled people and those with long-term, multiple health conditions. The GoWell Panel recommended that the Scottish Parliament takes a more proactive approach to engagement by visiting communities more frequently. For example, the GoWell Panel thought there was an opportunity for more two-way knowledge exchange and dialogue between communities and the Scottish Parliament as part of a commitment to participatory democracy.

The GoWell Panel greatly appreciated receiving subsidised travel expenses when attending a Scottish Government workshop in Edinburgh. The Panel therefore

recommends that travel expenses are subsidised for under-represented communities to the Scottish Parliament.

The formality of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee's meeting was also in itself a barrier. While the Scottish Parliament's brochures help explain the formality of committee meetings, and while the GoWell Panel understands that the strict impartial role of the Scottish Parliament requires due process, the set-up of the room and tone of the committee meeting were sometimes off-putting for Panel members. GoWell Panel members felt that a committee meeting would be able to adopt a more engaging tone and room set-up while still upholding strict impartiality.

The Committee's meeting featured fast-paced discussion, presumably because there was a great deal of evidence to process. However, it was challenging for GoWell Panel members to hear what was being said and to digest it. In the long term, it would be helpful for the Scottish Parliament to reflect on its capacity to increase the accessibility of its public meetings. The GoWell Panel particularly recommends that the microphone volume is increased for the hard of hearing, and that a sound check is conducted at the start of public meetings to ensure that volumes are sufficient for everyone present.

Attending the Committee's morning meeting involved an early start for GoWell Panel members. It was also a long day, particularly for those members of the group who were disabled and who had multiple health conditions. It would be helpful if complimentary refreshments were provided to public visitors. There was tea and coffee in the room, but it was not clear whether these were solely for Committee members, and so it is recommended that this is communicated more clearly.

Finally, the GoWell Panel understands that the Local Government and Regeneration Committee been superseded by the Local Government and Communities Committee. We would recommend that support and help is made available to help communities navigate changes in committees and the subsequent rotation of the clerks who support them.

ⁱ Scottish Community Development Centre and What Works Scotland. *National Standards for Community Engagement*. Scottish Government; 2016. Available at: <http://www.voicescotland.org.uk/>