

SAMIR LEE

Samir Lee recently completed a master's degree in Public Policy at Edinburgh University. The dissertation – 'Unusual Suspects: Committee Engagement at the Scottish Parliament' – was based on research he carried out during a two-month placement at the Parliament. This looked at how (and with whom) committees engage during their inquiries, through the lens of five case studies from Session 4. The executive summary of Samir Lee's dissertation is provided below.

Key discussion points—

- A brief overview of his research
- Unpacking some of the different meanings of engagement
- How far do committees go with public engagement?
- Committee inquiries:
 - 'The usual suspects' in consultations
 - Factors affecting the diversity of committee witnesses
 - Open and closed (by invitation) processes
 - The status/use of different kinds of evidence (and how this relates to participation)
 - Public engagement as an 'add-on' / public engagement with purpose
 - How engagement might be evaluated
 - Opportunities for further public participation.

Executive summary of dissertation—

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.