

INVOLVE

About Involve

Involve is the UK's leading authority on public participation. We believe passionately in a democracy where citizens are able to take and influence the decisions that affect their lives. Through both research and practice we seek to radically transform the relationship between citizens and their governments to support greater engagement, collaboration and accountability in ways that work for both citizens and organisations.

We are a 'think-and-do tank', with offices in London and Edinburgh who focus on the practical realities of public participation, to bring about:

- Better practice – in engagement strategy, design and delivery
- New thinking – through research, evaluation and advocacy
- Greater capacity – with training, mentoring and advice

Strengthening Participation in Parliamentary Business

Involve's focus on the participation of citizens in the decisions that affect their lives means that we approach the question of strengthening public engagement with the Parliament from a perspective that looks for opportunities for public involvement: and particularly opportunities for the public to contribute to decision making.

One key opportunity for this seems to be through the work of Parliamentary Committees.

Committee's clearly have well established mechanisms for calling for evidence from community stakeholders to inform inquiries and legislative scrutiny. While there is no question that this is a tried and tested means for bringing different perspectives into the discussion, there is sometimes concern that the views of the wider public can become overshadowed by organised lobby groups and 'those who shout the loudest'. For the MSP sitting on committees, engagement with their constituencies and the wider public is a fundamental part of the day job, and there are clearly also opportunities to bring this knowledge into their committee work.

The challenge, however, seems to be to find opportunities for Committees to engage more widely as a *Committee*, in meaningful and purposeful ways.

We know that across the UK, and beyond, Parliamentary Committees are increasingly experimenting with different ways to raise awareness of their activities and bring a greater diversity of public views, perspectives and experiences into their deliberations:

- Outreach visits to affected communities;
- Directly inviting community members with lived experience of the issue under discussion to meet with the Committee in less formal contexts;

- Using social media and other new communication technologies to reach people who would not otherwise be heard;
- Crowdsourcing ideas to help set a Committee agenda or define the scope of an inquiry;
- Initiating targeted consultations or engagement exercises to hear from less well represented groups.

It is however all too easy, in thinking about undertaking wider engagement to focus on *how* it can be delivered, and let practical considerations (like timetables, member's time, resources, staff, available skills) drive planning decisions.

Effective public engagement however is a process, and a process that should always start with questions of 'Why?' Without a clearly defined purpose engagement activities, while they may increase public awareness of the activities of the Parliament, risk adding little value to its work. Therefore, in looking for opportunities to widen public participation and engagement with the work of the Parliament, we would suggest the most important stage is to spend time considering questions of purpose:

- Why is it important to open up a particular question/issue to wider participation?
- What is it that the engagement can add to what MSP's already know or will hear from other sources?
- Who do MSPs really need to hear from? Whose perspective might be missing?
 - those directly affected by an issue / decision;
 - those with a unique insight into a matter;
 - a representative sample of the general public – the unaffiliated public voice?
- What do MSPs need from their participation?
 - to hear a diversity of voices;
 - to create opportunities for dialogue;
 - stories of lived experience;
 - ideas for change?
- How will MSPs use the information generated?

This will not only allow for the most appropriate method to be identified, but is also the best way of demonstrating to the wider public that the Parliament is genuinely interested in their views, that their contributions will be valued and, ultimately, encouraging ongoing engagement.