



Written Submission

Our voices ■ Our choices

Commission on Parliamentary Reform

Inclusion Scotland is a national network of disabled people's organisations (DPOs), organisations led by disabled people themselves, and individual disabled people. Our main aim is to draw attention to the physical, social, economic, cultural and attitudinal barriers that affect disabled people's everyday lives and to encourage a wider understanding of those issues throughout Scotland. Inclusion Scotland is part of the disabled people's Independent Living Movement. As a result of our lived experience, disabled people can make a positive contribution to improving the decision-making of public bodies. If it works for disabled people, it will work for other service users too.

Inclusion Scotland welcomes the Commission as an opportunity to address how the voices of disabled people can be better heard and disabled people can be better represented in the Scottish Parliament and across Scottish public life. We have given oral evidence to the Commission and co-hosted a consultation event for disabled people with members of the Commission in Edinburgh. This response takes accounts of what disabled people told us.

1. Making the Scottish Parliament More Representative

- 1.1 Disabled people face massive physical, informational and attitudinal barriers to participation in Scottish political life. As a consequence, we are under-represented as Local Authority Councillors, on Health Boards and in the Scottish Parliament. One in five people in Scotland are disabled, yet only in one of the 129 MSP in the Scottish Parliament only one MSP has identified as being disabled.
- 1.2 An increasing focus of Inclusion Scotland's work has been how we increase the direct representation of disabled people in public life, including as elected councillors and MSPs. We have been supported in this work by Scottish Government Funding for our Parliamentary Internship Scheme and Access to Politics and Access to Elected Office Fund projects. The latter two provide advice to disabled people and political parties on increasing access and participation, and provide funding to level the playing field, respectively. We welcome the commitment from the Scottish Government in "A Fairer Scotland for Disabled People" to continue the Access to Elected Office until 2021.
- 1.3 Our work has demonstrated that there are many barriers to the full participation by disabled people in the work of Parliament, and elected office in general. While the Parliament building itself operates to generally good standards of physical accessibility it is important that Scottish Parliament staff, MSPs and their staff are fully trained in disability equality training to help awareness around the less physical and less known aspects of accessible practice.

- 1.4 Our Parliamentary internship program for disabled people had considerable success in helping disabled people achieve career progression in the area of politics and Parliament – five of our seven interns went on to further paid work with MSPs, two of these permanently. There was also clear evidence of increased understanding of disability, barriers and how to remove them among participating MSPs, their office staff, officials in the Scottish Parliament Corporate Body, and others that interns came into contact with. For a tiny programme there was a disproportionately large and positive legacy for all concerned. We welcome that the Scottish Government has committed to funding Scottish Parliament Interns as part of the wider third and public sector Internships for Disabled People scheme run by Inclusion Scotland over the next three years.
- 1.5 Among the largest barriers disabled people have highlighted to us which have yet to be addressed is the issue of working hours and patterns. For some (although not necessarily all) disabled people the (arguably greater than) full time hours currently expected of an MSP are unlikely to ever be accessible to them. Without this being addressed a significant section of the community will be excluded from elected office.
- 1.6 An possible solution to this issue is job sharing – where a disabled person could take up an MSP role alongside a job-share partner to cover the full responsibilities and hours of the role. This is a necessary change to bring about full inclusion of disabled people, which would have clear benefits for those with children or other caring responsibilities also. This option clearly merits full consideration, and **we strongly recommend the Commission support this change.**
- 1.7 As well as support for job share, our engagement has also highlighted a number of other options to make the Parliament more representative of society, including:
- In addition to Constituency and Regional MSPs, some MSPs should be elected to represent specific groups in society (specifically underrepresented equalities groups such as disabled, ethnic minority, LGBT or gender). For example, there could be one representative for each of the Equalities Act Protected Characteristics (9 in total).
 - A second chamber which could include people who represent specific interest or who bring particular skills and experience, including lived experience. It was noted that some Members of the House of Lords are appointed on this, rather than a Party Political basis. The Seanad Éireann elects some of its members from vocational panels, which could be a model for election from equalities panels.
 - Shadow Committees, made up of representatives from the equalities groups, who would “equalities test” the work of the Scottish Parliament Committees, including how effectively they have engaged with equalities groups and provide effective equalities monitoring of the business before the committees.
 - Encouraging Political Parties to be more accessible, for example through reserved places on lists and support and mentoring for disabled people seeking to become candidates, including through Inclusion Scotland’s Access to Elected Office Fund and Access to Politics projects.

2 Engagement

- 2.1 Inclusion Scotland regularly engages with the Scottish Parliament on behalf of or members and disabled people across Scotland. This includes

- Oral and written evidence to Committees.
 - Briefings to MSPs for Chamber debates.
 - Membership of the Cross Party Group on Disability
 - Individual meetings with MSPs.
- 2.2 We have also arranged consultation events where Committee members have come to hear direct from disabled people about their lived experience, for example during Stage 1 of the Social Care (Self-directed Support) (Scotland) Bill and Stage 1 of the Public Bodies (Joint Working) Bill.
- 2.3 Some of the most effective evidence sessions have been where disabled people themselves have been able to give direct evidence to the Committee, within the support of DPOs like Inclusion Scotland. For example, during a round table session during Stage 1 of the Mental Health (Scotland) Bill, we were able to support Steve Robertson from People First to give evidence which led directly to a Scottish Government commitment to review the definition of mental disorder in mental health legislation.
- 2.4 Disabled people have also had good experience engaging with the Public Petitions Committee, for example with the ongoing petition on the Abolition of Social Care Charges. Scottish Parliament Committee staff are generally very helpful in enabling disabled people who require reasonable adjustments to participate in Committees.
- 2.5 However, the formal Committee process can be inaccessible for many disabled people, including those who live in remote communities, This can be because of timing of meetings (eg disabled people can find it difficult to get to meetings early in the day because of care or transport needs), inaccessible documents, lack of confidence, absence of communications support, etc.
- 2.6 Inclusion Scotland's experience is that disabled people will be more likely to engage, and the engagement will be more productive, when public bodies work in partnership with Disabled People's Organisations that disabled people know and trust. DPOs like Inclusion Scotland understand how to make engagement more accessible to a wider range of disabled people with different impairments, including learning disabilities, mental health, autism and sensory impairments, as well as those with physical impairments. We also have experience of reaching seldom heard groups including disabled refugee women, disabled LGBT people and, particularly through our Highlands Local Policy and Engagement Project, disabled people in remote communities
- 2.7 Committees could enable more disabled people to give direct evidence by allowing DPOs to bring and support a disabled person to give evidence to the Committee with us.
- 2.8 Committees could seek to more frequently engage with disabled people outwith the formal committee sessions, for example by using rapporteurs or sub-groups of committee members to meet disabled people in their own communities. DPOs can help to support such engagement by identifying appropriate locations, disabled people and local DPOs, as well as providing advice on accessible engagement.

- 2.9 One of the barriers to engagement is that people can find it difficult to find information on when and how to give evidence and when it will be considered. Although the Scottish Parliament website has a “current consultations” section, not all calls for evidence are included in this. Each Committee seems to have its own practice on how it publicises calls for evidence and work programme. Whilst recognising Committees may wish to have their own identity, there should be some consistency in how this basic information is presented.
- 2.10 Similarly, the short notice of the detail of Parliamentary Business can make it difficult for organisations and individuals to engage effectively with MSPs ahead of a debate. Business Motions should give more detail of the business in subsequent weeks (beyond “Government Business”) to give more time for civic society to contribute to the debates. In particular, it does not provide time to produce information in accessible formats such as easy read, braille or BSL.
- 2.11 The impact of the administrative burdens imposed by the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016 on the ability of third sector organisations to effectively engage with the Scottish Parliament will need to be carefully monitored.

3 Accessibility

- 3.1 During our engagement, disabled people have told us of a number of issues regarding accessibility of the Scottish Parliament and its procedures, website and documentation. Some of the issues raised include:
- 3.2 **Physical Access** – Some improvements are needed to physical access for disabled people. This includes more space for those who need it in the Public Gallery, and additional unlimited blue badge parking spaces (at present there are only three spaces outside the Parliament building which have a 3-hour limit).
- 3.3 **Website** – Whilst generally meeting accessibility standards, the amount of material can make it difficult to use and to find information (for example on current calls for evidence - see 2.9). particularly for those with visual impairments.
- 3.4 **Accessible Documents** – Documents are not always written in accessible language, and rarely in alternative formats such as easyread or even BSL. To make them easier to access, all documents should have a short executive summary in plain language, and a clear hierarchy to make it easier to find specific sections. This will assist people with visual impairments who are unable to scan documents to find the information they need.
- 3.5 **Disability Equality Training** – All Parliament staff, and MSPs, particularly those who deal directly with the public, should have disability equality training. Ideally this should be provided by disabled people or DPOs.

4 A Disability Champion

- 4.1 One suggestion from our engagement event was that the Scottish Parliament should have a Disability Champion. This would be a one-stop should for disabled people who require information about access or other needs. But the Disability Champion should be a sufficiently senior role, in partnership with DPOs and Disabled People, to

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be able to “access check” all aspects of the Parliament’s work, recommend improvements and check progress.

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