

LOCHABER DISABILITY ACCESS PANEL

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**The Commission on Parliamentary Reform, Your Parliament, Your Voice
Consultation:**

About Us

The Lochaber Disability Access is based in Fort William representing the elderly and disabled residents of and visitors to Lochaber. Although our remit is centred around the needs of the elderly and disabled our work helps create a barrier free environment for everyone in the community.

The Lochaber Disability Access Panel is made up entirely from volunteers living in Lochaber. The Panel is open to everyone with an interest in any issues relating to the most vulnerable members of our community

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?

No.

When the Scottish Parliament was first established it was very innovative in how it interacted with the public. The Outreach Teams interaction along with the Petitions Section giving assistance to those wishing to lodge a petition, were both excellent examples. The Scottish Parliament was leading the way at this time, sadly over the interim period. it has rested on its laurels and now lags well behind other parliamentary institutions

All too often the first many groups and individuals are aware of a consultation being conducted is when it is about to close. For those living in rural and remote areas it is extremely difficult to engage in consultations organised by the Parliament. Public Consultations Meetings are often allocated to Third Sector

organisations to arrange and host, they normally host the meetings in the larger city and towns, this may be down to their limited funding. However this means that those living in the more rural and remote areas are being excluded from the discussions, due to the logistics relating to the limited and sporadic public transport and electronic communication connections in these areas.

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

The Lochaber Disability Access Panel have had numerous engagements with various parliamentary departments over the years. It has always been very simple process for the Panel to contact the Parliament.

The main frustration to the Panel is when the various departments respond using meaningless parliamentary language, which explains absolutely nothing and often the response has nothing to do with the subject in question, which in reality leaves us more confused than when we made the initial approach.

We have previously attended the Disability Cross Party Group. This involves our delegate departing at 0603 and not returning home from Edinburgh till 2335, all this for a ninety minute meeting with numerous items on the agenda. This prevents any meaningful discussion on any issue.

While we understand the difficulty of MSPs attending too often they are absent, and when they are in attendance they are busy on their mobiles or being passed messages by their staff.

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

By continually using National Third Sector organisations funded by The Scottish Parliament's Equalities Unit to organise and carryout consultation surveys, despite MSPs and many of the Parliamentary Departments being well aware of the existence of groups such as the Access Panels in the more rural & remote areas of Scotland, where the needs and opinions of these communities will greatly differ from those held by organisations located in the Scottish

Central Belt. Using groups such as these will ensure more informative responses specific to that location

The use of response tools such as survey monkey limit the answers given with the person setting the questions unintentionally leading the respondent to answer in a particular way

The Outreach Team re-establishing contact with communities. A decade ago we attended public meetings organised by the Outreach Team at which the local MSPs were in attendance, not only did these events highlight the work of the Parliament it also enabled the public to meet their Regional List Members of Parliament

Part 2: Distinct Identity

4. Is it important that the Scottish Parliament is seen as separate from the Scottish Government [or from the UK Parliament (House of Commons and House of Lords), UK Government and local government]? What are the reasons or evidence for your views?

This is a very interesting question, and it may be worth first considering if the Scottish Elected Members to the Palace of Westminster know the difference regarding what is reserved and devolved issues, especially when they are using social media sites such Facebook. Is it any wonder why the public are confused when they see MPs passing comments on devolved only issues.

Confusion definitely exists in the public's perspective between the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government.

The Panel does not consider the terminology to be one of the reasons for this confusion.

Many of the public see the Government and Parliament as being one entity.

The confrontational nature of politics now across the UK means that the opposition parties are no longer seen to be part of the parliamentary process, but are viewed as being outside of the actual workings of parliamentary procedure

Do you think the Scottish Parliament is confused with the UK Parliament (House of Commons and House of Lords), UK Government or local government?

The confusion arises when there is an overlap of legislation and which parliament's remit the issue falls under, for example on issues of health/disability/benefits and pensions payments. There is a Westminster Secretary of State for Disability and in Scotland it comes under the remit of the Health Secretary. The Panel contacts MPs and MSPs to avoid the ping-pong game of being told we have to contact the other parliament

5. What should the Scottish Parliament do to strengthen its distinct identity?

Checks and balances

This is the single major problem that currently exists, there is absolutely no accountability in the Parliament or the Local Authorities. The Scottish Parliament repeatedly introduce new Bills and Acts, yet they are all meaningless pieces of paper.

We could fill Hampden Park and Murrayfield Stadium with all the legislation that currently exists relating to accessibility, disability, and the elderly, yet in the real world none of these acts of parliament are being enforced.

The GIRFEC legislation is a perfect example where a current issue is having a devastating effect on thousands of families across Scotland.

The reality of the situation is GIRFEC, the Blue Badge and Illegal Parking Bills are led by the financial climate at any given time, and are only enforceable when the monies are available

The various Scottish Parliamentary Agency staff could visit areas on a more frequent basis to listen to the residents of that area. In the Highlands it does not matter what you are discussing public transport is always the most problematic identified issue. The general feeling is no one listens, so why do we bother

6. Do any of the checks and balances need strengthening to better enable the Scottish Parliament to hold the Scottish Government to account? What are the reasons or evidence for your views?

As outlined in the previous answer, continually producing legislation which is unachievable is meaningless. The introduction of a simplification and clarity of the legislation is urgently required, which actually gives it a chance of working on the ground.

Regular reviews should be carried out on the Acts which have been introduced assessing what is working and what is not

7. At what stage of the policy or legislative process is the Scottish Parliament likely to have the greatest influence or impact in terms of improving Government policy or legislation? What are the reasons or evidence for your views?

Obviously it be the very start of the process. Since the Independence Referendum we are continually being informed by those involved in politics there is greater interest in the process. It would be a logical conclusion that now is the time to enhance the engage with the public

Every constituent in Scotland has eight elected representatives in Parliament, yet very few constituents are aware of this, even those who do know would struggle to name them.

Creating a Discussion Forum/Panel locally would be beneficial to everyone. The Panel is aware of the logistics in this especially to the politicians. If two or three of the politicians were available with the rest of Forum/Panel numbers coming from the local regional councillors. This could contribute in a clearer understanding of the others position. While also providing further clarity for the public of the differences and workings of the Parliament and the Local Authority.

Perhaps these discussion groups could be held during the Parliamentary recesses

8. What other factors impact on the effective conduct of parliamentary business and how these can be addressed?

Enabling the Cross Party Groups such as the Disability Cross Party meetings going round the country focusing on issues relevant to that area, with an agenda that allows constructive and meaning full discussions to take place.

Using agencies known within their local communities would be a more representative and accurate means of gathering relevant information from their area. The majority of the elderly and disabled through Scotland are not members of the national organisations.

It often appears to the general public that the Scottish Parliament picks an issue which then becomes the buzz word for a period of time before another issue is selected to be focused on. Highlighting to the public that all issues are equally important to the parliamentary bodies and are being worked on even if they are not the current buzz word