



The Church of Scotland

Church and Society Council

Official Response

SUBJECT: Your Parliament, Your Voice – Commission on Parliamentary Reform call for written views

REQUESTED BY: Commission on Parliamentary Reform

REFERENCE: OR-2017/02

DATE: 27 March 2017

SUBMITTED BY: Chloe Clemmons on behalf of the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office, chloe.clemmons@scpo.scot

Introduction

The Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office (SCPO) facilitated a consultation event in Edinburgh on 7 February 2017 using the Commission on Parliamentary Reform Discussion Toolkit. There were 15 people present for the facilitated discussion sessions. Most, but not all, of those present have participated in the SCPO project “Meet Your MSP” which aims to bring together members of local churches and their elected representatives. More information about the project is available on the [SCPO website](#). The views expressed at this event form the basis of the responses about engagement with the Scottish Parliament.

The Church and Society Council of the Church of Scotland conducted an engagement exercise in 2015 called '[Speak Out 10,000 Voices for Change](#)' in which almost 11,000 people from every part of Scotland took part. From this exercise seven themes were drawn out, one of which is “Doing Politics Differently”. As part of this work the Church will explore the role of participative processes in revitalising our democratic systems. It is welcome that the Scottish Parliament is considering the ways in which it engages with communities through the Commission on Parliamentary Reform.

- 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?**

Among the participants everyone had experience of engaging with MSPs at local or national level. Examples include attending events in the Parliament such as the Carol Service or a Reception; attending Committee meetings with particular mention of the Public Petitions Committee; giving evidence at a Committee Meetings and participating in Cross Party Groups and speaking at events.

The Parliament and the way it operates were seen positively. There was particular praise for the Public Petitions system which was described as “impressive” and as “a fantastic piece of democracy”. The Committee system in general is a good example of cross party approaches which are valued. The culture of the Parliament is to be accessible and the size of the Parliament is helpful

in making this possible; it feels very human and personable. A particular example given was around the inclusion of community on the life of the Parliament in Commonwealth Day celebrations, and at the official Opening of Parliament. People are more likely to engage with the Parliament on a specific issue which is of interest or relevant to them rather than to engage with the Parliament as a whole.

The Parliament was perceived as having open access; examples given were around ease of school visits and the architecture of the building. Many people live and work in close proximity to the Parliament which enables easy physical access. The availability of a free crèche was noted as was the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act. However, there was a strong feeling that this ease of access enabled engagement for the large number of people who lived relatively near to the Parliament; there remain challenges to enable people in remote locations to enjoy that same access.

It was highlighted that Regional List MSPs often have a lower profile than Constituency MSPs; it was perceived to be easier to engage with a Constituency MSP.

The group considered the extent of public political awareness and whether there is a desire or willingness to engage. It was suggested that there was a culture of entertainment which means that there is less willingness to actively participate.

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

The most common form of engagement was meetings with MSPs and their staff. Contact with MSPs, particularly meetings either in the Parliament or in surgeries was seen as a catalyst for further engagement including encouraging people to use the Parliament website to find information. Other forms of contact that were valued were social media, particularly Facebook. People also highlighted the importance good relationships with individual MSPs as a starting point for engaging in discussion around specific issues. People who had contacted their MSPs had generally found them quick to respond and helpful.

A range of examples of interaction were given both locally and in the Parliament:

- The Meet Your MSP project has encouraged people to start relationships; this has generated better awareness of other local initiatives. The project has given people permission to seek out contact with their MSP and has broken down barriers to making the initial contact.
- One participant had invited an MSP to visit a project, following the visit the project was praised in a motion in the Parliament. This was well received locally and made people feel that their MSP was interested in local activity and was ready to listen to them.
- The Church of Scotland National Youth Assembly (NYA) invited Maureen Watt MSP, Scottish Government Minister for Mental Health, to speak at the 2016 NYA and they were encouraged that she was willing to attend and interact with delegates.
- There was appreciation of MSPs chatting on the doorstep and being available to talk about a wide range of issues in this informal setting.

A number of participants were interested in accessing information about Parliamentary debates and watched or read about debates regularly. For some people it was felt to be a big step to move beyond being aware of debates and act on the information.

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?

People want to get involved to make a difference. One factor that encouraged people to get involved was seeing examples of previous engagement that has made a difference and achieved something. Related to this, there was some pessimism about the level of impact people can achieve which deters people from acting. People do not always realise that they can be influential, they think their voice will not be heard. There was concern that there is a more general sense of apathy in society, it is difficult to persuade people to come to events and take action. This may be related to a lack of trust in the system or a negative experience of attempting to get involved. Strong local engagement and links between local action and national policy work are needed.

It needs to be clear what the commitment, time, energy and expenses attached to involvement will be. People need the right information to enable them to be more involved; too much information is as problematic as too little information. It is important that there is clarity around processes and how to raise issues so that people feel confident that they are able to make effective contributions. Creating ways for people to get involved quickly and easily would assist people to get involved more often, as would clarity about how to get involved on particular issues. Some of this clarity can come from relationships with politicians. Relationships are also a way to allow people to realise that their work is interesting and exciting to MSPs.

One barrier to involvement is a degree of confusion between responsibilities of MPs, MSPs and local government. It was suggested that politicians have some responsibility for this as the boundaries are blurred by political parties during election campaigns. The emphasis on party politics as opposed to focussing on the issues is also a challenge to involvement.

There was a strong feeling that being invited to get involved was important, examples given included responding to a consultation on Facebook and getting involved with the Meet Your MSP Project. It was suggested that the Parliament and MSPs should be more intentional about inviting involvement.

Some participants have given evidence to Scottish Parliament Committees; it was felt to be important that Committees heard from people with relevant lived experience which might not be characterised by professional expertise. Some groups, such as those experiencing homelessness, may need extra care to enable people to participate. There was a particular concern to ensure that processes for involvement were relevant and accessible to young people.

Some caveats were expressed around the importance of involvement. For some issues the Parliament does not have an impact, people can feel more focussed in their local communities and sometimes people felt their local issues seemed removed from the Parliament. Involvement needs to be real and productive; it must address the cause of the problem and not just the symptoms.

There was a mix of views about whether involvement should be an opportunity or a requirement; one person suggested compulsory voting while others acknowledged that involvement can be at lots of different levels depending on what else is going on in a person's life.

There was discussion about forms of democracy, we have a parliamentary democracy and for some people it was important that we build trust in our elected representatives. Alongside that need for greater trust there was a desire to explore more direct democracy while acknowledging that it requires time and commitment from citizens to make this model work. The role of citizens taking responsibility for being part of the process locally and nationally was seen as important.

The Parliament is encouraged to explore how participative processes could be used to enable deeper public engagement in decision making.