

Improving engagement between the Scottish Youth Parliament and the Scottish Parliament

Introduction

This paper has been produced in response to a request after a Commission for Parliamentary Reform Workshop run by John McCormick and Katie Burke MSYP at the Scottish Youth Parliament Sitting in March in Edinburgh. At the workshop, Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYPs) and SYP staff discussed their experiences of interacting with the Scottish Parliament and how that engagement could be improved to ensure that young people's voices are being heard.

This paper will expand on some of the themes discussed at that meeting and make some practical proposals for how those themes could be taken forward by the Commission in its final report. It will focus specifically on some recommendations about how the Scottish Youth Parliament could work with the Scottish Parliament to allow it to significantly improve its engagement with young people.

About the Scottish Youth Parliament

The Scottish Youth Parliament represents Scotland's young people. Our vision for Scotland is of a nation that actively listens to and values the meaningful participation of its children and young people.

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) is the democratically elected voice of Scotland's young people.

Elections are held every two years, in which young people from all across Scotland stand as candidates to become Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYPs).

MSYPs range in age from 14 to 25 and represent constituencies in all 32 local authorities throughout the country, and several national voluntary organisations.

Our democratically elected members listen to and recognise the issues that are most important to young people, ensuring that their voices are heard by decision-makers. We exist to provide a national platform for young people to discuss the issues that are important to them, and campaign to effect the change they wish to see.

It is very important to be aware that SYP's democratic mandate makes us a unique organisation in Scotland. MSYPs are elected every two years by their peers in their constituencies, and consult regularly with those constituents. They are obliged to represent the views of the young people they represent locally, with the whole organisation representing those views on a national platform. The extent of this democratic mandate sets us apart from all other organisations working with young people.

Additionally, MSYPs, with the support of their local authority/voluntary organisation, are experienced at carrying out consultation activity with their constituents. This is a key requirement of their roles.

Our Values

- **Democracy** – We are youth-led and accountable to young people aged 12 to 25. Our democratic structure, and the scale of our engagement across Scotland gives us a mandate that sets us apart from other organisations.

- Rights – We are a fundamentally rights-based organisation. We are passionate about making young people aware of their rights, and ensuring that local and national government deliver policies that allow those rights to be upheld.
- Inclusion – We are committed to being truly inclusive and work tirelessly to ensure the voices of every young person from every community and background in Scotland are heard.
- Political Impartiality – We are independent from all political parties. By working with all stakeholders, groups, and individuals who share our values, we can deliver the policies that are most important to young people.

SYP is core funded by the Scottish Government via the Children and Young People's Early Intervention Fund.

How SYP currently engages with the Scottish Parliament

SYP is fortunate to have very good connections with MSPs from all political parties, with individual parliamentary Committees, as well as with individual Scottish Parliament staff members.

There are numerous examples of how these relationships have been mutually beneficial. For example, the Public Petitions Committee approached SYP for a position on a petition that would require doctors to secure the consent of parents before a young person is given medication for a mental health problem. After this approach, SYP held a consultation workshop on the subject at our March Sitting and the responses from that session will be analysed and presented to the parliamentary Committee as evidence.

However, SYP believes these connections are currently under-utilised, and that, while there are some examples of good practice, these can be ad-hoc. As a result, we believe that there is scope to improve parliamentary engagement with our members and, by extension, with young people across the country.

There is a clear appetite amongst MSYPs for improved engagement with parliamentarians, based on a real desire for them to have the views of their constituents heard.

Proposals for improving the connections between SYP and the Scottish Parliament

- **Local**

Many MSYPs have built strong relationships with individual MSPs in their constituencies. For example, some MSPs hold joint surgeries for their constituents, so that both the MSYP and the MSPs can hear constituency concerns and agree how to tackle them.

MSYPs can also help MSPs understand the concerns and priorities of the young people in their area in many ways, including by providing an overview of the issues that matter the most in consultations such as our *Lead the Way* manifesto (which was produced on the basis of 72,744 responses from young people across Scotland).

However, developing the relationships between MSPs and MSYPs does depend on the willingness and enthusiasm of the individuals involved.

To rectify this, we propose that there be MSP induction training developed that includes specific reference to the work of MSYPs and signposting to contact details etc, as a means

of ensuring that they are aware of, and able to take action on, the issues affecting the young people they both represent.

We also propose that SYP staff team work with the Scottish Parliament equivalents on this, and could also support this by providing training to new MSPs personally.

Enhancing these relationships would ensure that MSPs have a strong understanding of the issues affecting their younger constituents, a group which it they may otherwise find it difficult to traditionally to engage with.

- **Subject Committees**

Every year, every MSYP volunteers for a Committee role. SYP Committees then elect a Convener and Deputy Convener and agree a work programme for the year. SYP Committee remits broadly reflect those of the Scottish Parliament Committees.

Some SYP Committees build up extremely strong relationships with their Scottish Parliament equivalents through joint pieces of work (such as with the Public Petitions Committee and with the Education and Skills Committee) but these can rely upon the work and enthusiasm of the individual SYP Convener or other Committee members.

As a result, a significant amount of the work of each SYP Committee is often focussed on building those relationships each year, rather than engaging upon the issues it is focussed upon.

SYP believes that if these relationships were to be enhanced, and active engagement between Scottish Parliament and SYP Committees was the default, parliamentary engagement on the views of Scotland's young people would be significantly improved.

In practical terms, each Scottish Parliament Committee could commit to meeting with its SYP equivalent on a semi-regular basis, to discuss issues of mutual interest. This would allow the Scottish Parliament Committees to test its work programme with a group of young people (who would be representative of a much broader cross-section of young people) and also allow the SYP Committee to raise the issues that their constituents are most concerned about. SYP Committee members could also be tasked with carrying out a consultation exercise in advance of any such meeting on topics that could be agreed between both Committees, to ensure that a much broader group of young people's voices were heard in those discussions.

SYP Committees should become statutory consultees on all major policies or pieces of legislation (although there would of course be resource implications for such an approach). MSYPs could provide advice/guidance on any issues affecting young people that are being considered by Committees.

Another additional means of improving engagement between SYP and Scottish Parliament Committees would be an annual meeting between the two groups, at which priorities for the year ahead could be discussed, and progress on those issues reviewed. SYP has recently secured agreement from the Scottish Cabinet that a meeting with the full Scottish Cabinet and Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament will take place on an annual basis, at which MSYPs will share the views of all of Scotland's young people on key policy issues, and we would be very keen to establish a similar event with the Scottish Parliament Conveners. Group.

- **National Sittings**

SYP meets three times a year at our national Sittings. At these Sittings, all MSYPs take part in debates on the issues that matter the most to their constituents.

They also take part in breakout workshop discussions (eg on live Scottish Parliament consultations) and various other activities, including SYP Committee meetings.

The Sittings are usually hosted by local authorities and have in the past been held at the Scottish Parliament.

By hosting a Sitting in the Scottish Parliament, a large group of young people will come together and awareness of the work of the Parliament will be raised. There is also a huge amount of potential for a Sitting at the Scottish Parliament to directly enhance the work of the Scottish Parliament and its responsiveness to the views of young people.

For example, SYP Committees could directly engage at Sittings with their Scottish Parliament equivalents, even with meetings that could be co-chaired by the equivalent Conveners.

We could also hold additional topic specific workshops on issues relevant to parliamentary business eg relevant petitions etc, and, again, ensure that MSYPs had consulted with their constituents. This would ensure that the views of a large range of young people were accurately reflected in Scottish Parliament consideration on key topics.

It has already been agreed that the Autumn Sitting 2017 will be hosted in the Scottish Parliament. Going forward it would be beneficial for at least one Sitting to take place in the Scottish Parliament every two years, possibly at the same time of the year (summer sittings would be ideal). This Sitting could be configured so that the breakout sessions accurately reflect the needs of Scottish Parliamentary business at that point but also feed into the calendar and work of the Youth Parliament.

- **The Presiding Officer**

The youth Parliament is passionate about young peoples civic engagement and political literacy. With the lowering of the voting age to 16 years old we feel that improving the way we inform young people about democracy is essential.

At every sitting of the Youth Parliament since its inception there has been a motion put forward discussing how Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) can improve to fill this educational gap. This needs to be driven and designed by young people, so that they can get the information they need most.

Alongside this there, in our view, needs to be more of a push at a national level for civic literacy and voter registration. As a non-party aligned Parliamentarian, the Presiding Officer would be well placed to promote such meaningful engagement. He could, for example, lead a voter registration drive for those aged 16-17, that would greatly help electoral turnout.

At the very least exploring the scope for this within his current role would be welcomed, and a promising commitment by the Parliament to engage with young people across Scotland.

Other comments

We are aware that the Commission is considering suggestions from consultees around the establishment of a second Chamber at Holyrood.

While SYP does not have a formal position on this proposal, we believe that, if such a group was to be established, it is essential that MSYPs, and young peoples voices, have a formal role in it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while we believe that there are some excellent examples of how SYP is working with the Scottish Parliament, we believe there is significant potential for improvement, in the ways outlined above, with relatively modest resource requirements.

We believe that there is a willingness and enthusiasm amongst MSYPs for greater engagement with the Scottish Parliament, and that small improvements in the existing links between SYP and the Scottish Parliament could have a major impact on engagement with young people in Scotland. The Scottish Parliament should be ambitious in how it engages and works with young people going forward.

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