All Highland and Island Disability Groups
29 June 2022

Background and Participants

The Scottish Parliament collaborated with disability advocacy groups to arrange an online discussion session with Parliament for individuals with lived experience of various disabilities who live in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, including the Western Isles, Orkney, Shetland, Moray and Highland.

This report is a summary of the discussion we had on the 29th of June with 9 individuals who live in the Highlands and Islands and have lived experience of disability.

Discussion

How connected do you feel to the Scottish Parliament?

On a scale from 1 to 10 with 1 being the least connected and 10 being the most connected: two participants scored 1, three participants scored 3, one participant scored 5, One participant scored 6 and two participants scored 7.

Those who scored relatively high (6 & 7s) did so because they felt the that Scottish Parliament was "open in comparison to Westminster" and that there were more opportunities to "feel heard." Another participant said they "haven't had input since I became disabled, and would like to have more of an input."

However, others who provided lower ratings (1, 3 and 5) said that they felt "less heard" because of "no feedback when I contact MSPs" adding it is "important to get feedback on the issues that we raise."

> *"Connection is more than just saying something to somebody, it's about knowing the information has transferred and knowing it's in their thoughts when they carry out parliamentary business"*

What barriers are there to your participation?

The group split into 3 breakout groups to discuss the key issues that stop them from participating in the work of Parliament. Key issues raised are summarised below:

Access to Parliament

While the group appreciated how accessible the Parliament building is in terms of step free access, they noted that it is "a long distance to travel" to attend from the Highlands and Islands and that the barrier of distance is exacerbated by other difficulties relating to lack accessible transport and a "lack of connectivity in the Islands" of Scotland.

Access to spaces to share views

The group added that there were also significant barriers to engaging with the work of Parliament because of the lack of accessible venues in the Highlands and Islands, including MSP advice surgeries being held in inaccessible venues, and a lack of community spaces where face to face engagement can take place.

"Just because it says accessible on a door does not mean that the venue is accessible in practice."

Issues included access to "change place toilets" and spaces "with appropriate 1.5 metre turning circle" for larger wheelchairs. There was also a need for venues and engagement event organisers to "be mindful of access issues as things change in the room" as while a room may be accessible at the start of an event, by the time chairs and objects move in the room the space could become inaccessible and cause wheelchair users to be excluded from the discussion.

The group also raised the issue of the psychological barriers that could impact on disabled people in attending engagement events as the process of attending could cause anxiety. One participant highlighted that they worry when they go out to attend events: "Can I go out? Will someone help me? Will I be forgotten about?" These concerns lead people to decide not to attend events.

Poor feedback

Another barrier was the "lack of feedback" from MSPs relating to correspondence or the use of "standardised" "copy and paste" responses to concerns raised:

"There is a lot of talk from Parliament that says 'Yes, we want to hear about your lived experience, but if you are not listened to and you have a bad experience then it is less likely that you would take part in the future."

"Lack of feedback dents confidence and make you less likely to take part."

Another participant noted that "failure you follow up" or showing no evidence of "active listening" in feedback "and not hearing what people say" is detrimental to public participation in the work of Parliament.

Communication Barriers

Another theme raised by the group was the different types of communication barriers that get in the way of engagement. For example, "the use of written communication excludes people." "Writing is really hard" and there should be alternative ways for people to express views to Parliament beyond the written word.

The group also highlighted social barriers to engaging with Parliament, noting that it is "difficult to have political conversations unless you are a certain type of person" with the "confidence to engage and say what they think. You have to communicate in a certain way, use certain words or you won't be listened to".

Another communication barrier was the need for Parliament to be "really clear" and "show that they are listening" and a "lack of awareness" about how some people prefer to communicate. For example, some people struggle to pick up on visual cues and body language in verbal, face-to-face communication and there is a need to explicitly show that the Parliament is listening: "So what I am hearing is..."

How do we need to change to make you more likely to take part in the work of Parliament?

Following the discussion about barriers the group discussed potential solutions to the problems raised.

Improving access to opportunities to take part: Community Hubs and Technical Support

To overcome the barriers of lack of spaces to engage in rural areas the group suggested the use of accessible Community Hubs:

"We should work towards a community hub set up throughout local communities, locally designed, allowing a group setting surgery with an MSP or 1 on 1. These hubs should be a modernisation of a village hall, locally designed, so taking accessible bathroom and seating requirements into account."

The hubs would benefit from being informal spaces, "not have everything formally set out. It would be useful to have a couple of armchairs to make it more of a "chat" rather than an "us and them" setup."

The group felt this change would overcome the issues raised about the lack of truly accessible space in communities for engaging with MSPs and Parliament.

However, it was noted that while "you can design a hub for example in local areas, that is fully accessible, you would also face the issue that no matter where you build a hub people would need to travel in, and so you would need accessible transportation" to be available in communities to facilitate maximum participation.

"It is difficult to organise the transport for people who need accessibility from rural areas – something that is locally based is needed, where people can go to speak to who they need to speak to." "It's about being able to communicate where you're comfortable."

The hubs could also signpost opportunities people to get involved in committee work and support people to access consultations and engagement processes. The group felt that this would be especially useful for people who don't know how to use

technology and providing the option "being able to speak face to face to somebody or a group of people."

Improving Feedback: examples of previous clear feedback and minimum standard of response

The group called for feedback to based on "honest dialogue instead of platitudes" and focus on action and outcomes instead of the "get out clause" of simply saying "lessons will be learned."

The group felt that being able to "see success and impact from previous engagement processes would be very encouraging" because it would give confidence that the Parliament listens and takes engagement seriously.

"We're beating our heads against a brick wall so a visible watermark for being listened to/progress being met would be great" as currently there "nowhere we can go to see that."

The group agreed that "there should be a certain level of service that we're expecting from MSPs and ministers. Someone should be monitoring how they speak to the constituents, and ensuring they have a minimum standard to meet and it's not all copy-paste responses."

Support to communicate and engage

The group discussed the ways that Parliament can improve the way it communicates and provides options for people "to be able to give your views in a way that is suitable for their illness."

For example, in addition to the community hub idea listed above, the group wanted to see a "dedicated phone line to get support to participate in online consultations"

They also approved of being able to "record what you want to say and upload" as a video recording of spoken English, as well as an option to communicate via BSL via video recording.

Community intermediaries

Finally, there was a discussion about there "a way that communities themselves can be intermediaries between their representatives and the rest of the community."

Some suggested that this could be achieved via better use of Community Councils.