

Connecting Craigmillar: Syrian Group

27 June 2022

Background and participants

Connecting Craigmillar is a project that aims to bring local people together by supporting individuals and groups to take forward new ideas for activities. The Scottish Parliament collaborated with Connecting Craigmillar to arrange two visits to Parliament for individuals from the Kurdish and Syrian diasporas.

This report is a summary of the discussion we had on the 27th of June with 11 individuals who live in Edinburgh and are originally from Syria. Participants were also accompanied by a community development worker from the Connecting Craigmillar project.

Participants learned about the work of Parliament, the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee and were taken on a tour of the building. Participants were then joined by Paul Sweeny MSP to discuss barriers to participation and potential solutions that could help to increase community participation in the work of Parliament.



Discussion

Have you ever engaged with the Scottish Parliament before?

Yes 2

No 10

How connected to the Scottish Parliament do you feel?

On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being the least connected and 10 being the most connected the participant responses were:

One respondent said 5

One respondent said 7

One respondent said 8/9

One respondent said 9

One respondent said 9.5

Seven respondents said 10

Everyone giving high scores said it was because they see the Scottish Parliament as being representative of the very welcoming attitude of the Scottish people, and how they were able to vote without pressure as a change from their home country.

Individuals who gave comparatively lower scores (5,7) said it was because while they vote in Parliamentary elections they have never engaged further in the work of the Parliament.

What barriers are there to your participation?

- (One person suggests that Scottish people don't need much, so that might be why they don't take place in politics as much!).
- Language.
- Struggles with having their qualifications recognised here, makes it harder for them to feel integrated and connected.
- Family/time commitments.
- Lack of information about what avenues of participation are available to them – didn't know about surgeries for example.
 - Raising awareness of the ways people can participate is one of the widely agreed issues, alongside the issues of the qualifications/skilled work
- Lack of local integration initiatives and support networks.
- Health.
- The struggle to get connected over the phone prevents a full feeling of integration/participation in society
- Another barrier is the inability to sit the theory test in their native language – limits transportation, but is a reserved matter "I've been driving for 30 years, but I can't drive in this country, because I know I wouldn't pass the theory test." – they have stopped providing interpreters during theory test sitting

- Negative experiences surrounding “politics” in their home country – represents oppression and authoritarianism.
- Lots of people with experience and time to contribute – how to tap into this?

When asked about the barriers to participation, we received a variety of responses, many of which were echoes of those from previous sessions. One of these was the pressure of personal life matters, such as family/financial demands. The first and foremost was language. Due to the group having limited capabilities in English, they felt that although they were very passionate about democracy and participation in the Parliament, they had limited ways to do so.

This carried over into wider issues around integration into society, as several things were closed off to them by their inability to speak fluent English. An example that was brought up and many felt passionate about was that of driving. They highlighted the fact that the DVLA no longer provides an interpreter for the theory test if you don't speak English/Welsh, and so many people can't pass their tests. As one person stated, “I've been driving for 30 years, but I can't drive in this country because I know I won't pass the theory test.” The various measures put in place to circumvent this within the context of the Parliament, such as the ability to submit views in any language and have the Parliament translate for them, were totally unknown to the participants, which led into the second major barrier.

This issue, a lack of awareness around the means by which people can participate, was widely agreed upon as a key issue. For example, the group didn't realise that their local and regional MSPs would hold surgeries in which they would be able to go and see them. As a result, one member of the group highlighted that, “a major issue is that there is a huge amount of people with ideas and abilities who want to participate but don't know how, so how can we tap into this?”.

This need to raise awareness of the different paths to participate in Parliament was absolutely key to the discussion. It was said that it is all very well and good to have the different solutions to, for example, the language issue, but if people don't know about the solutions then they have a very limited benefit.

An issue that arose in the context of this discussion was the Edinburgh-specific lack of programs and organisations designed to get recent immigrants or refugees integrated into political life. It was noted that while these exist in Glasgow, they are lacking in Edinburgh.

Interestingly, there was another issue that the group widely agreed on. This surrounded the word “politics” itself. One member of the group said, to nods in agreement, that the word to them means, “you support the regime, otherwise it means you open your mouth and you're going to prison”.

How can we make you more likely to take part?

- In favour of the citizen jury – simple idea, it should have happened years ago “In Syria these things don’t happen, in a democracy this is something logical as it is a good democratic idea” – widespread agreement.
- Should be strong interaction between the communities and the Parliament, anything that strengthens these ties is good, more participation of any form also good.
- The group suggests that they will submit a petition on the topic of the qualification recognition issue.
- “An MSP, elected by a certain community, should meet up with the constituency as a committee every month” – many in the group didn’t know about MSP surgeries, may attend some now.
- “We have a weekly meeting; an MSP should attend to meet with us”.
- Better financial situation should allow people to have less pressure on them, and therefore more time to participate in civil society.
- More local initiatives “Glasgow as a dispersal centre has strong refugee integration programs and organisations, Edinburgh is new to the refugee community and doesn’t have the same groundwork laid”.
- Maybe not a need for a new mechanism but highlighting the ones that are already there and raising awareness.
- More recognition of the cultural differences and backgrounds: “politics” more of a threat in Syria than a positive thing to be participate in: “for us politics means you support the regime, otherwise it means you open your mouth and you’re going to prison”.

With regards to the possible solutions to the problems, there were many different ideas brought up. Citizens’ juries were overwhelmingly favoured by the group. One participant said “it’s a simple idea, it should have happened years ago. In Syria, these things don’t happen, but in a democracy, it is something logical as it is a good, democratic idea”.

Another said, “there should be a strong interaction between the communities and Parliament, and anything that strengthens these ties is a good idea.” Consequently, the group resolved to submit a petition to the committee on having their qualifications recognised in the UK, to allow them to work in their fields. For example, one person was an architect in Syria, but is unable to be one here due to a lack of recognition of their qualifications.

This goes hand in hand with another issue: the financial instability experienced by many refugees means that many are working long hours, and don’t have the time or energy to expend on involving themselves within the democratic process. Better support networks, recognition of their qualifications, the ability to have their drivers’ licenses carry over to the UK, and other helpful changes to legislation would allow them to participate more and more deeply.

More local initiatives were suggested: MSPs going out into the community and meeting with local groups, rather than waiting for the local groups to get in touch with

them for example. This would show that the MSP is actively seeking to serve and represent the community that elected them. One member said, “an MSP elected by a community should definitely make an effort to meet with that community, maybe once a month”.

As stated previously, the group weren't aware of MSP surgeries, although that does suggest that not enough is done to raise awareness of them. Furthering this, the group made plans to get in touch with their MSPs and invite them to group meetings: “we have a weekly meeting; an MSP should attend to meet with us”. Ultimately, the feelings of the group were summed up by one member: “Maybe there is not so much a need for a new mechanism, but a need to highlight the ones already there.”