Public Participation at the Scottish Parliament
What people told us

Background and gathering views

Between May and July 2022, the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee ("the Committee") asked people to share their views on whether the Scottish Parliament's work involves, reflects and meets the needs of the full range of communities it represents.

The Committee did this in a few different ways. It ran two different surveys. A short survey aimed to find out about the people who have or have not been involved in the Scottish Parliament's work, and their experiences. A longer survey allowed people to share their views on what can be done to improve public participation in more detail. The Committee also held 10 focus group sessions, which gave people a chance to share their views with the Committee. These groups were chosen because they included people who might be less likely to get involved in the Parliament's work, which includes people from minority ethnic groups, people living on a low income and disabled people. The groups were facilitated by Scottish Parliament's Participation and Communities Team and were hosted in collaboration with:

- AboutDementia
- Active Inquiry
- Bridge End Farm House
- TPAS
- Regional Equalities Councils
- Connecting Craigmillar: Kurdish Group
- Learning Disability Assembly
- Connecting Craigmillar: Syrian Group
- All Highland and Island Disability
- RNIB

The focus groups took on various formats, based on the needs of participants, from facilitated small group discussions and informal chats, to using character development, role play and theatre to express feelings about the Scottish Parliament.

The Participation and Communities Team worked in partnership with organisations, groups and networks that work with under-represented individuals to create opportunities for people to participate in the focus groups in a safe in trusted environment. Sometimes this would involve arranging to hold discussions in spaces familiar to participants, such as existing pre-planned meetings or events, supporting groups to visit the Parliament for a discussion, or hosting an online discussion.

To this aim, as well as the focus groups the Committee held some online drop-in sessions that were run at different times of day to ensure people had the opportunity

to participate at times that worked for them. If they preferred, people were able to email or write to the Committee.

Summary approach

In this summary, compiled by the Scottish Parliament's research service (SPICe), we have set out the key messages, learning prompts and suggested action points that people shared with us.

This is a little different from a traditional summary of evidence, where a summary of what people answered to each question is set out. The hope is that it will better reflect the issues, challenges and solutions that people spoke about in a clear and easy to understand way, and can be used for a range of audiences, including to feed back to the people who shared their views. Views and evidence have still been attributed, but not in every instance because there were a lot of points that were made by many people.

By breaking views down into messages and actions, we hope that the summary process will feel less academic, and more democratic.

This approach also reflects the fact that this is an unusual scrutiny activity, in that it is to a great extent the Committee scrutinising the Scottish Parliament as a whole. There will undoubtedly be learning points and ideas here that will not only influence the Committee's next steps and report, but will be used by the Parliamentary service

All the responses that people asked to be made public will be published in full on the Committee's web page, and summaries from focus groups will also be shared alongside the published evidence.

Throughout this summary, researchers' notes have been added in *italics*. The intention here is to add some context to the data provided, giving a more holistic picture.

Who took part?

Our detailed survey had 35 responses, which came from a fairly even mix of individuals and organisations. Those representing organisations were from mostly voluntary organisations supporting communities, and from non-profit organisations with a specialist focus on democratic participation. We also heard from a number of academics. Most of the individuals who took part identified themselves as having a specific interest or being part or a group that they felt was underrepresented in the democratic process. We also received 4 submissions sent directly to the Committee, which came from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Healthcare Improvement Scotland, People First, and Dr Danielle Beswick of the University of Birmingham.

305 people took part in the short survey. People who took part came from, across Scotland, covering 25 of Scotland's 32 local authorities, and around 17% said that they had never been involved in the work of the Scottish Parliament before. Participants represented most age groups, from 13 years old to 65 or over (though most were 35 or older). We've explored some of the demographics of these

participants in the next section and have also published a separate summary dedicated to the results of this survey.

Overall, 119 people took part in our focus group sessions. These represented a broad range of individuals including those from minority ethnic and immigrant backgrounds, those with physical and learning disabilities, those from low-income backgrounds, and those living in rural and island locations.

We invited people to submit in the language they felt most comfortable with. On our surveys, we had one response in Polish, one person used Gaelic, and four responses came from BSL users.

All in, this summary covers the voices of over 460 individuals and organisations, from a diverse range of backgrounds.

Key messages

There were several key messages in the views people shared, which were often repeated and spread across the questions we asked.

Key message 1

Although people with protected characteristics are underrepresented in the work of the Scottish Parliament, people said those with a low-income are most likely to be underrepresented

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Protected characteristics

When asked to identify which groups are currently under-represented, the responses to our detailed survey were broad, and were very much replicated in the shorter survey. As might be expected, a number of groups mentioned belonged to groups with protected characteristics, as defined by The Equality Act 2010 and The Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) (Scotland) Regulations 2012.

The Equality Act defines the following as protected characteristics:

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

Most of these characteristics were mentioned. Of these, people from ethic minority and migrant backgrounds, people with disabilities (physical and learning, along with mental health problems and the neurodivergent), and children and young people were mentioned/selected the most. There were also several mentions of women and older people, which was reflected most strongly in the short survey responses.

Transgendered people were mentioned in one response to the detailed survey, but not as an underrepresented group. Rather, it was suggested in the context of women's rights that Trans people have their own spaces. There was similarly a suggestion of a trade-off between supporting Trans people, and supporting women, in the short survey. One person replying to the detailed survey felt that straight, white (specifically Anglo-Saxon), Protestant males are underrepresented, and there were several responses to the short survey also suggesting men were underrepresented. There were no other mentions in the detailed survey of people being underrepresented because of their sexual orientation, or their religion/beliefs. Although there was more mention of these characteristics in the short survey, they were still lesser cited characteristics. There were a handful of statements in response to the short survey that suggested that some people in majority groups feel they are ignored in favour of minority groups (but statements contradictory to this were far more common).

Those not covered by equalities legislation

Moving away from the protected characteristics, people on lower incomes, and those with lower educational attainment and lower literacy were the most mentioned across both surveys. This covered both unemployed people, and people who were employed in low-income jobs and likely to have a lack of ability to take time out of work. Those with caring responsibilities, and young parents, were also mentioned as being 'time poor'.

Rural and island residents, and even non-Central Belt residents, were seen as being less likely to attend the Parliament and its events because of geographical barriers (especially around transport time and cost). Although there was a lot of support for digital and hybrid working, people highlighted that many people are digitally excluded (because of skill/education, and money), with ties made to age group and social media use. Age Scotland gave a good overview—

> "In Scotland, around 500,000 over 50s do not have access to the internet and up to 600,000 over 50s do not have a smart phone. The reasons behind not being online will vary from person to person, and for some this will be a deliberate choice. However, for others, it may be due to living in an area with poor connectivity, because they feel they don't have the confidence or skills needed, or because they cannot afford the necessary equipment or cost of a broadband connection. According to the Scottish Household Survey, older people in the 'most deprived' areas are less likely to use the internet than in the 'least deprived' areas – and this gap may widen as the cost of living rises and people cut back on spending. Evidence shows that disabled people are more likely to face digital exclusion. Ethnic minority older people are also at risk of digital exclusion due to language barriers, affordability concerns, or finding new learning challenging."

Some of the groups mentioned could be seen to some extent as self-selecting - non-voters, people who do not use Scottish-based media, and those with less confidence in the topics discussed. However, it's likely that many of these people are in fact affected by the issues above, making their participation less likely - educational attainment, language, income, and disability could all play a part in people's options and decisions.

In the focus groups held, we heard from a diverse range of audiences who did not usually confirm their economic status, however based on the geographic locations and communities we spoke to it's likely that many of the participants in the focus groups were from less affluent backgrounds.

Many submissions highlighted that intersectional individuals, i.e. ones with more than one of the characteristics or circumstances mentioned above, will be even more likely to be underrepresented. Specifically, people from ethnic minorities on low incomes, disabled people living north of the Central Belt, immigrants with mental health support needs, and young people with learning disabilities were among those mentioned. It was also suggested that people who don't belong to a community or a specific group can be hard to reach.

Finally, there was some mention of people grouped by profession – members of the police force, teaching staff, and veterans were all mentioned as people with whom the Scottish Parliament should be connecting with more.

Contradictions and discussion points

In the shorter survey, we asked people to identify groups/types of people who might be more or less likely to be involved in the work of the Scottish Parliament, using opposing questions with the same list of possible responses. Because the same list for both was used, we essentially asked the same question in different ways, capturing a more nuanced scale of opinion.

The five groups considered the most likely to be involved, starting with the option with the highest number of respondents and working down, were 'people with a high income', 'older people', 'people of working age', 'men', and 'people from LGBTQ+ communities'. When people were asked the opposing question, the responses suggested a similar set of groups, but with 'people on average incomes' replacing 'older people'.

Those groups most rated to be least likely to be involved, were 'people on a low income', 'people with learning disabilities', 'children and young people', 'people who are neurodiverse (e.g. With autism, adhd etc.)', and 'people from minority ethnic backgrounds'. Again, when we asked the opposing question, the results were similar, but 'children and young people' and 'people from minority ethnic backgrounds' were replaced by 'people with physical differences' and 'women'.

Across both questions, women were equally rated as more likely and less likely to engage, which demonstrates a diversity of views. Looking at ratings and comments together, there are contradictory beliefs about certain groups – many people suggested that older people are more likely to engage because they have time, but many others said they are an overlooked group. There are similar views on young people. People of working age were seen as likely to be one of the more involved groups, yet one of the most cited barriers to participation was having time around work commitments. People from minority ethnic backgrounds were seen as less likely to be involved (because of language, cultural barriers, and exclusion), but conversely many people felt that more had been done to seek the voices of these groups than of other groups. It is very clear from the more detailed comments people left that there is a feeling that people who are part of groups which have the support of the voluntary sector and lobbying groups, and strong communities, may be the groups most likely to be involved because of the support structures they benefit from.

Overwhelmingly though, across all evidence, there was a strong consensus that people who have a socio-economic and educational disadvantage were the least likely to be involved in the work of the parliament, and the wealthier, higher educated were more likely to be involved. The transcending factor that people felt broke this barrier is having a specific cause or interest, access to organised support, and an interest in, or at least knowledge of, politics.

Demographics of respondents

Because this was an opportunity for people to be involved in the work of the Scottish Parliament, and a self-selecting exercise, it's interesting to look at the demographic information people gave us. Put simply, whether the people who got involved in our short survey matched the profile of those we might have expected, based on who people *told us* would engage the most.

Note that we did not include demographic questions in the detailed survey as this was where we expected more people to be responding on behalf of organisations. Interestingly, this meant that people responding to that survey were generally citing research or evidence (or indeed choosing not to answer because their expertise did not lie within the Scottish Parliament's activities specifically), and in most cases citing a range of demographic groups. The people who responded to the short survey were individuals, and only around a quarter identified themselves as having never been involved in the work of the Scottish Parliament. This may or may not mean that they cited their own characteristics when naming groups more or less likely to be involved.

The largest group of people who responded were aged over 65, and over two-thirds of the people who took part were over 55. There were far fewer people aged 34 and under, and only a handful of children and young people took part.

Over half of the people who took part did not consider themselves to be on a low income, and the majority identified as White, and Scottish or Other British.

Religion was not mentioned much in comments, which may reflect the fact that the greater proportion of respondents identified as belonging to no religion or belief system than any other specific grouping.

Again, as per what people told us, we had a lower number of responses from people with learning disabilities, physical disabilities and neurodivergences than people who said they had a long-term illness/condition, or no illness or disability.

All these demographics reflect what people told us about those who were more or less likely to be involved in the Parliament's work.

However, far more women than men took part. There was also a far greater number of respondents who identified as heterosexual than LGBQ+, and only a very small number of respondents identified as transgender. This contradicts many of the views expressed in both surveys. However, it may well be the case that topical issues (see Researchers Note below) and organised campaigns connected to these issues influenced the self-selecting demographic that took part.

RESEARCHERS NOTE: It's clear that, as with any survey, people will respond citing issues that are currently of high political and media interest. Although there are multiple comments which relate to a wide range of current discussion points (immigration, the war in Ukraine, UKG policy, isolated reporting on politicians, and wider 'scandals'), there is one topic which stood out for the high number of comments. Matters pertaining to gender recognition, other LGBTQ+ issues, and the recent Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021 have all been cited more than any other grouping of issues, often with some of the more strongly worded statements. Accompanying comments centre around inappropriate power being

given to lobbying groups, "politically correct" agendas pertaining to minority groups being pushed at the expense of the majority, and expressions of mistrust in politicians, political parties, political institutions and government. This context is important to note, because it adds some topicality to other categories – a high proportion of responses which identified women as underrepresented also raised the issues above for example. This highlights the challenges of looking at any one point of data in isolation, and the need to be aware of wider social and political issues that will influence what people identify as key issues at any one point in time. Almost all the supplementary comments on each of the demographic questions "what is your sex" and 'do you consider yourself to be transgender" argued in favour of gender being binary, and there were objections given to the ethnicity categories used (taken from the Census) based on the separation of 'Scottish' from 'Other British', which emphasises how topical issues can impact even on demographic questions. On demographics, it should also be noted that it will typically be the case that certain consultations will attract specific demographics because of those affected/interested. It is interesting to reflect that this is a consultation aimed at the Scottish population in the broadest sense, where no specific interest group has been targeted, yet the results may still have been skewed because of the timing of the consultation in relation to other, arguably unrelated, matters.

Key message 2

People from disadvantaged backgrounds don't feel that engaging with the Scottish Parliament is worthwhile.

What is overwhelmingly clear in the responses to both surveys is that people need to feel like their involvement has a purpose and is worth any sacrifice they may have to make to be involved. This could be an obvious sacrifice, like having to spend time and money to physically attend a meeting at the Scottish Parliament. But could also be far more subtle.

People spoke about the need to be clear about what would happen with people's views, and the extent to which they could influence outcomes and policy. This tied into timing – there was a clear suggestion that people would be more likely to participate if they knew it was at a stage in the consultation process where real change could be made. A lack of influence over the policies being debated was described by many as being 'tokenistic', and ultimately not worth people's time. The newDemocracy Foundation gave the example of work in Ireland, where "because of visibly successful projects (Eighth Amendment CA) response rates to random invitations now exceed 20% where 2-5% is more common elsewhere".

Age Scotland said "we sometimes encounter a sense of reluctance from older people to share their views as part of Government and parliamentary calls for views and scrutiny, as they feel that things "will not change" as a result. Those who have previously engaged tell us they find the lack of action, progress or change that follows frustrating – particularly if they have invested time and effort in sharing their views. Others feel that efforts to engage merely go over the same ground when the main issues at hand have not changed.".

People First (Scotland) said "We have spoken a lot about the difficulties that people with a learning disability face; politicians tell us they are doing something about, they tell us they listen to us but nothing much has changed.".

In our focus groups, themes were similar. A participant in the Active Inquiry session spoke of apathy, disenfranchisement and feeling ignored leading to feelings of depression and no desire to engage.

Some of the other 'costs' and barriers to taking part identified (in Involve's response) included:

- Being overburdened with other life responsibilities. Participants in our focus group with the Syrian community spoke about the pressure of personal life matters, such as family/financial demands. Others spoke of having little time for anything beyond working.
- Fear of reprisals for speaking out - including for those with precarious lives. This could include people being afraid to lose their tenancy if they speak out on housing issues, or people being afraid of losing their job.
- Fear of threats and harassment on social media for publicly sharing opinions.
- Feeling intimidated by the building and the official status of the Parliament.
- Because there is nothing in it for them.
- An inability to focus on issues, though lack of interest, a feeling of relevance, or through neurodivergence (ADHD was mentioned).
- A lack of budget available to mitigate challenges like translation, respite, travel support etc. was also mentioned in focus groups.
- People don't know what route to take to get involved, and at the focus groups in particular people spoke about the challenges of just understanding how to get in touch with their MSP for support, let alone being involved in wider parliamentary work.

> **Key message 3**
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> **People often struggle to engage in the work of the Scottish Parliament as they don't feel representatives reflect them, or their communities needs and concerns.**

This was a common theme, both in the detailed survey and the short survey. Respondents spoke about not feeling represented on various levels – by MSPs, by government ministers, and by the staff they encountered from the parliamentary service. This connected with a notion of "hostility towards decision makers who seem remote and out of touch" (Involve).

CRER included some statistics on the diversity of MSPs and the Scottish Parliamentary service—

> "Although the last Parliamentary election led to six MSPs of BME origin, all are of South Asian descent, leaving many minority communities in Scotland still unable to see people of their own ethnicity represented in elected positions. This under-representation is not limited to elected office – the data that is available still shows an under-representation of parliamentary staff who list their ethnicity as 'minority ethnic' and the SP Diversity Monitoring Report

for 2020/21 does not provide ethnicity breakdown by grade (although a gender split by grade is provided). Perhaps more worrying, although the percentage of applications for positions in the Parliament from BME people was at an all-time high of 15%, the success rate for BME candidates to appointment was just 3%, compared to a success rate for White candidates of 10%, and the ethnicity pay gap increased year on year from 21.3% to 27.6%."

Interestingly, people also spoke about not seeing themselves represented within the people they see us engaging with – i.e., the people who give evidence to Committees. There is a perception (and evidence to support) that witnesses tend to be older, male, middle-class and university educated (Stephen Elstub, Newcastle University). As well as leading to people feeling that the Parliament 'isn't for them', it also gives the impression that the same voices are heard repeatedly, and that there is "little scope for fresh ideas" (Forth Valley Migrant Support).

Together argued that the voices of children and young people are underrepresented and suggested that decision-makers can be "resistant to change" and that at times "adults can be unwilling to engage with children and young people directly". This often leads to a reliance on third-sector services to help children and young people to share their voices.

Media representation was also mentioned. One individual responding to the detailed survey highlighted that he rarely saw his local area (Dumfries and Galloway) featured in national TV news coverage, or his veterans' organisation mentioned in Scottish Government news releases.

A key message from focus groups included the idea of the institution "expecting people to fit into the Parliament's environment and way of doing things". People said things like:

> "I wouldn't even think of that. I wouldn't know where to go. But seems like a battle to be heard unless you were a big group or had lots of money."

> "The only way I can see to get involved with the process is to be a part of a political party, you need connections. One lone person does not have the possibility of accessing, a committee. A general member of the public could not access a committee or get involved."

> "Your impression is, it's a huge building that you feel you are not allowed to go in."

Key message 4

Education has a vital role to play in breaking down barriers to participation in the democratic process.

In noting the demographics least likely to participate, Involve, citing other research, said that "the most significant determinant of political engagement is education. In general, the more education someone has received the more likely they are to be politically active (Verba et al. 1995). These are universal dynamics to political

engagement and representation and apply to the Scottish Parliament too (Cairney and McGarvey 2013).". This notion was echoed across many responses.

newDemocracy said that most consultations are "dominated by the enraged and the articulate as they get the most benefit or have the most at stake", however the wider evidence would suggest that 'articulate' is the key word here.

Alan Renwick from the Constitution Unit at University College London pointed out that people feel they do not have the information needed to take part in democratic activities. This impacts on their self-confidence in stepping forward when opportunities arise – they may not feel they have anything useful to contribute. Involve said that a key barrier to participation was people "genuinely not knowing that there are options available to do so".

There were several suggestions that education goes both ways – decision-makers and the people that work with them need to understand more about the people they are engaging with, and different communication methods. Several responses spoke about the role of third parties in the engagement process, in particular voluntary organisations and support services. These services provide education and facilitation both ways – to those the Scottish Parliament wishes to engage with on the democratic process, and to the Members and staff of the Scottish Parliament on the needs of different groups. This is, however, resource intensive for the organisations, and the process of supported engagement requires additional time and resources from a parliamentary perspective as well. CRER suggested that there is a lack of expertise in race equality issues amongst some elected officials, saying "we believe increased racial literacy by MSPs could improve understanding and awareness, and, therefore, improve policy and scrutiny, and this in turn would lead to increased participation."

Many people spoke about a lack of education on the democratic process and how to be involved explicitly. They also spoke about how off-putting legal disclaimers and long meetings could be to people. In focus groups, people highlighted that even where politics is taught in school, it very much focuses on voting, and there is little learning about being involved in the democratic process between elections. That said, in the online focus group we ran there was a feeling that when somebody has an issue, they don't understand or particularly care about the differences between the Parliament and the government, they just want their problem solved and it is very unclear who they need to speak to about that when current methods are not sufficient.

RESEARCHERS NOTE: What was also reflected in responses was a potential lack of understanding on the role of the Scottish Parliament (and scope of the inquiry), the Scottish and UK Governments, and where and how political parties fit in to this process. Rather than discount submissions where people have used the opportunity to speak about their grievances with leadership, political figures, policies and matters outwith the scope of the inquiry, Committee and Parliament, these submissions can illustrate how a lack of political knowledge can impact even where people are engaging.

In many cases, when organisations representing, and individuals from, minority groups spoke about the involvement of these groups in Scottish Parliament work, they spoke about Cross-Party Groups (CPGs). This included during our focus groups,

We asked people about the different methods of engaging with the Scottish Parliament. CRER said "We would have liked interaction with the Scottish Parliament Website to be included in the means of people being involved, and also included should have been participation in Cross Party Groups."

They also explained that "Cross Party Groups have been a major point of contact with MSPs, certainly for many members of Black / Minority Ethnic communities. This is particularly the case for smaller Voluntary Sector or volunteer-led organisations. One of the main strengths of the CPG system is that it allows non-Parliamentary members to easily identify a selection of MSPs with a particular interest in their subject area who may be receptive to information or lobbying activities. The opportunity to engage with these members on a personal level is valuable, and the group setting makes this easier to arrange and more cohesive – non-Parliamentary members often wish to put forward similar issues for discussion and the group setting allows a wealth of knowledge and experience to be explored. This consultation is a missed opportunity to consider further how to make involvement via cross party groups more effective. Additionally, as an incidental benefit, CPGs can provide a useful introduction to lobbying for those with no previous experience and allow them to build practical knowledge of parliamentary issues and procedures through engagement with MSP members.".

People First (Scotland) also spoke about representation on CPGs but expressed concern about the move to online meetings because of the difficulty in people with learning disabilities feeling they are getting their point across this way. They also said that late-night meetings were harder to be involved in, long meetings needed to have more breaks, and papers needed to be provided in time to allow conversion to easy-read formats.

In focus groups, minority ethnic participants felt that cross-party groups could reach out to community groups to connect them to similar groups or relevant organisations, creating wider networks.

RESEARCHERS NOTE Because CPGs are established and managed outside of the Parliamentary service, this may be an area which could be seen as outside the scope of this inquiry. It's important to see the user's perspective though, where this distinction may not be clear. To a member of the public, going to a CPG or contacting their MSP about something IS engaging with the work of the Scottish Parliament. This raises a wider issue that may benefit from further exploration – how best to better connect engagement and participation work which takes place in these contexts with Parliamentary work?

> **Key message 6**
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> **The Scottish Parliament needs to do more to tell people about its engagement and participation work, as those we reach are positive about the experience.**

Respondents gave examples of work that the Scottish Parliament had done, both from a participant perspective and more academic viewpoints, which had been good examples of participative democracy. There is evidence to suggest that some people feel very positively about the approaches used. Feedback on the work of the Parliament's Participation and Communities Team at the focus groups was very positive. Some people said that just being invited into the Parliament building or having MSPs and staff come out to talk to them at these events made them feel more connected. That said, when asked how connected they felt to the Scottish Parliament at the start of these sessions, on a scale of 1-10, over half of people asked gave scored at the lower end of the scale.

RESEARCHERS NOTE It would be useful for this question to be asked again during PACT's follow-up work with these groups to see if these sentiments have changed.

Together said "there have been several recent examples of promising practice" and gave the example of when the Equalities and Human Rights Committee examined the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill. With support from Together, members held numerous engagement sessions with children and young people, and Committee also produced a child-friendly consultation paper and resources to help children build their understanding of the issues.

They also cited the Equalities and Human Rights Committee's creation of a 'Meeting in a Box'.

The crucial thing to note in many of these examples is that they have been cited by people who were involved in the work or were/are in some way more cognisant of the engagement culture of the Parliament.

In the short survey, many people spoke about positive engagements with the Scottish Parliament – a warm welcome, enjoyable and informative tours, taking part in CPGs and attending Committee and Plenary meetings, and positive interactions with friendly and responsive MSPs and staff.

It's not possible, however, to consider these views without looking at the opposing views given, which were often from individuals (outwith interest or community groups), or people who had contributed and felt they had not been heard (see Key message 1).

Short survey respondents who had less positive experiences spoke about not receiving responses (from MSPs, and in relations to petitions), not seeing their submissions published, and feeling like they had no ability to influence decisions because the Committees and Scottish Government had already made up their mind.

RESEARCHERS NOTE It should be noted that a high proportion of people expressing that they hadn't been listened to or had been dismissed/ignored by MSPs referenced that this was in relation to the Gender Recognition Act.

There were some specific barriers highlighted related to the way the Scottish Parliament runs consultations. Together pointed out that many consultation exercises take place within a short timeframe and said that this was a barrier to engaging with children and young people in particular. People also spoke of finding it hard to find consultations on our web pages, and to find out the outcomes after the fact.

SCDC said that "Current opportunities to get involved such as petitions, cross-party groups and lobbying are relatively formal, complex and high-level. As such they are likely to be off putting for people from disadvantaged and marginalised communities who are often not as skilled and confident at navigating and making use of these opportunities. Opportunities to get involved in comfortable and informal ways, such as 'conversation cafe' type approaches should be made available."

It also pointed out that although it's aware of the education and outreach work the Scottish Parliament does, there's very little information on this in the public domain.

Involve spoke about the 2017 Commission on Parliamentary Reform and the changes that followed, including the establishment of the Parliament's Committee Engagement Unit, and said:

> "It would be helpful for the Parliament to commission an independent review of the impact of the recommendations that have been implemented, and the reasons for any lack of implementation. Not only would this provide valuable internal monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) as to what difference the implemented recommendations have made and what might still stand to be improved, it would also inform resourcing at a level that can actually make a difference and it would also prove useful for other legislatures considering wider public engagement."

Key message 7

Strengthening trust is essential to successfully involving people in the work of the Scottish Parliament.

Respondents made it clear that trust was an essential component in successfully involving people in the work of the Scottish Parliament. They told us this directly, and academics described the challenges, but it also came across less explicitly as people described their viewpoints and experiences. It relates to all the key messages above to one extent or another but given its prevalence it's important to emphasise and summarise some of the points made.

Key points include:

- People feel a lack of trust when they do not see themselves represented in policy or by the people that make policy. More pertinently, when people see people represented who they feel are very different or even directly opposed to them represented, it can reduce trust even more. The examples given suggested this happens in two very different ways.

The first might be more expected - people on low-incomes with lower levels of educational attainment feeling disconnected when they perceive that it is people from mostly wealthy, academic backgrounds who are making policy decisions.

The second is more surprising – people who feel that minority groups, or different minority groups from the one they belong to, are more represented than they are. There were, for example, several people who expressed dislike or distaste at what they felt was an unfair prominence given to LGBTQ+ people.

- People who have engaged with the Scottish Parliament, but do not feel their voice was heard, may lose trust and choose to not engage again. Again, this seems to happen for two reasons.

They may have contributed their voice to a single issue that was polarising (i.e., there was likely to be a 'winning' and a 'losing' side) and be unhappy with the outcome. This highlights a challenge for the Scottish Parliament and its participation specialists – how can trust and connection be maintained or restored with people who have had a negative experience, particularly when that negative experience was in this context?

The other situation was where people felt their voice hadn't been heard was later in the policy lifespan, i.e. well beyond the consultation stage. The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 (*which was subject to a lengthy and extensive consultation/outreach programme at the Bill stage)* was cited by more than one respondent as an example of policy which had not achieved its aims, partly attributed to a lack of effective implementation, but also because of a wider need for decentralisation of power across all of Scotland's democratic institutions. This emphasises that events and factors outwith the Parliamentary consultation phase can impact people's feelings about the engagement they took part in. In focus groups, one person said that they felt there was no point in taking part if nothing changes as a result, or if policy is too complex for them to understand what had changed.

- As noted, education around political structures leads to confusion about who is leading on engagement and consultation. This links to the example above, where a disappointment in the Scottish Government is also reflected in views towards the Scottish Parliament. This could reflect a lack of trust in the entire political system, but it could also reflect a lack of understanding about the differences between and role of each institution, particularly in the role of parliaments in scrutinising governments.

There was also a suggestion that a lack of engagement was symptomatic of a wider mistrust of and disengagement in politics. Age Scotland, having highlighted that research shows that older people tend to be less trusting of politicians than younger age groups, said that "While distrust in politicians is not within the Scottish Parliament's control to fix single-handedly, it is good to be aware of this as an issue affecting engagement levels.".

Jane Jones, the Scottish Parliament's first Public Participation Officer (appointed in 2004), said that there is "a growing narrative within the media, including social media, that politics is 'a waste of time' or that politicians are 'only out for themselves', a disaffection for politics and politicians which is very dangerous for our democracy. If people have taken time to give their views, in the hope it may influence change and feel nothing has happened as a result, they will be reluctant to try again and may well adopt such views".

The Electoral Reform Society Scotland said that "the contemporary system of representative democracy leaves too few opportunities for citizens to participate in the political process and people feel increasingly shut out from those in power and their institutions.". A number of people referenced other democratic bodies, including local authorities and community councils, as having a number of the same issues noted above, and there were a few voices in favour of widespread redesign of our current political system. Obviously, this goes well beyond the scope of influence of this inquiry, but it illustrates the scale of the barriers which some feel influence people's ability and desire to interact with the Scottish Parliament.

Key message 8

Breaking down barriers to participation will improve the diversity of participation and opinions in the work of the Scottish Parliament.

People were asked in the detailed survey how we will know we have been successful in overcoming barriers to participating in the Scottish Parliament's work. It's useful to look at the picture of success before exploring the suggested actions so outcomes can be kept in mind.

Overwhelmingly, people suggested that a more diverse set of voices and views would be a marker of success. This might be reflected (outside of the evidence itself) in positive feedback, but more pertinently in people feeling involved and reflected in policy.

A willingness for participants to stand behind their work and that of the Parliament was also seen as a measure of legitimacy. Participation levels should increase, as should public satisfaction with, and trust in, Scotland's democratic system (expressed in part through the media).

Digging deeper, linked to many of the issues of trust mentioned, people felt that success could be measured by policy being changed as a result of engagement, and some of the everyday challenges people face in life being addressed. One anonymous respondent said:

> "If you have been successful, the people who have felt under-represented will feel appreciated, more content and happier in their everyday life. This is meant to have an effect on everybody in their care/around them which should improve everybody's health and well-being, everybody's mental health, and perhaps help them make better lifestyle choices."

Several people suggested that there should be a monitoring and evaluation framework for participatory exercises. Together said to do this "Scottish Parliament

ought to: measure what has been achieved and why; set rights-based indicators which take into consideration different cultural, social, and economic contexts; and gather both qualitative and quantitative feedback and ideas of improvement from children and young people". The use of audits, academic evaluation and stakeholder boards as part of a monitoring framework was suggested.

Improvements in the Scottish Parliament's work were also mentioned as a marker of success. One individual said quite simply "You will have changed! You will work and behave differently. 'CBT' for politicians and civil servants at national (Holyrood) and local government level."

The Democratic Society said:

> "The clearest marker of success is that you feel a sense of continuous development in your engagement practice, and new groups are coming to you, seeking to be included in further developments. The Scottish Parliament's vision of being the national home for debate and deliberation is an essential anchor point for these conversations, but they need to be driven by engagement and inclusion inside and outside Holyrood."

Suggested actions

We asked people explicitly what the Scottish Parliament could do to make it easier for underrepresented groups to be involved in the Parliament's work in our detailed survey, but suggestions were made throughout the surveys, so this section captures the entirety of comments on that theme.

These actions have been grouped by theme – some are things which could improve existing approaches, and some suggest wholly new models.

Overarchingly, Stephen Elstub (Newcastle University) said:

> "Involvement in the work of Parliament can be made easier if it is CLEAR (Lowndes et al. 2006):
>
> • Can do – that is, have the resources and knowledge to participate;
> • Like to – that is, have a sense of attachment that reinforces participation;
> • Enabled to – that is, are provided with the opportunity for participation;
> • Asked to – that is, are mobilised by official bodies or voluntary groups;
> • Responded to – that is, see evidence that their views have been considered"

Transparency, openness, purpose and incentive

Reflecting key messages 2 and 7, people highlighted the importance of making it clear to participants how their input would be used, and more specifically, THAT it would be used – basically, that the effort of their participation would be worthwhile.

newDemocracy said that "A simple way to execute this online (where only the crazed and desperate contribute with any expectation of impact) is to make a clear Authority promise that a subsequent citizens' assembly will prioritise 20 (for example) ideas for detailed response. The incentives for an online contribution now change considerably."

Alan Renwick explained that:

> "At the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK, 93% of members agreed with the recommendation:
>
> 'The results of deliberative processes like citizens' assemblies that are initiated by government or parliament need to have an impact. When they are convened, there should be a guarantee that their results will be made public, their recommendations will receive a detailed response from the convening body, and they will be debated in parliament.'"

One individual said, "Parliament must be a hub for bringing together the widest possible range of civil society organisations that can contribute on a given issue -not just in terms of building legitimacy and good legislation but also to develop capacity for subsequent implementation.".

Long-term engagement was also seen as important, to support repeat engagement and build relationships. Methods such as SMS or app-enabled engagement, and 'gamified' engagement where the key opportunity of an event might lie beyond

participation, and in something more connected to the participants (i.e., connecting with neighbours, enjoying a free lunch), were suggested.

Listening and respect

Linked to the above, but perhaps less explicit, was the importance of listening to and having respect for underrepresented groups.

Women, children, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities were mentioned specifically as groups who should have their views treated respectfully. Participation should take place in a safe environment, and there should be a commitment to accountability by following up with participants.

People should be able to participate and share their voice in a way which is comfortable for them and using more creative approaches to suit the needs of certain communities, such as island communities, is important.

CRER felt it was important that events be held where MSPs could meet community members from under-represented groups in order to build relationships.

SCDC suggested that an equalities and human rights-focussed approach, such as the National Standards for Community Engagement would be a good model to use in engagement and participation. SCDC also noted the benefits of providing mentoring and emotional support to those participating, saying:

> "Experience panels are beneficial for participants in terms of building skills, knowledge, confidence and connections, but they can also be a daunting prospect as well as emotionally draining. People should be provided with continual support, ideally from peers or recognised support organisations who understand the needs of particular groups. Support should also be impartial so that participants feel they are able to raise any concerns or ask any questions."

One focus group participant said:

> "The person – me – who is approaching the Parliament needs to feel that they are being listened to, heard, and being recognised as someone who matters. So, getting feedback counts as you are not a voice in the wilderness crying out to this big body where your views can get lost – you don't know where your views go unless you get feedback.".

In the focus groups in particular many people's self-reported experience of 'engaging with the Parliament' was through engaging with their local MSPs. They spoke about not knowing whether their concerns had been listened to because they had no feedback or received only standardised responses.

A handful of respondents said that it was important that the voices of individuals be given as much credence as those from organisations when considering evidence.

Marketing and education

The general feeling was that the Scottish Parliament has a significant role to play in actively promoting and encouraging a culture of participation. One anonymous

respondent said that it was important to recognise and represent people with a visible difference in staffing, culture, policies and commitment to representation.

Related to a need to be open about the potential impacts of participation, was the suggestion that more should be done to market and champion instances where people have had their voice heard, particularly where it has led to a change in policy, or their idea being used. Specifically, newDemocracy said this should be done through the mainstream media. SCDC pointed out that the 'community outreach' pages that were a part of the former Scottish Parliament website had not been replicated on the new site and suggested this was a missed opportunity to promote the good outreach work done.

Jane Suiter of Dublin City University said that it was not enough just to include diverse voices in participatory approaches – other participants needed to be made aware of the importance of including these diverse voices. Sortition Foundation suggested that publicising the involvement and work of demographically diverse groups would help to normalise the involvement of those groups in the Scottish Parliament's work.

In focus groups, people spoke about language on two different levels. Both diversity of languages used to communicate, and the ability to understand the processes, procedures and reports being discussed and the "over-reliance on the written word". Essentially, to reach people we have to work in their language, be that in a non-English or accessible language, or simply making this less formal and easier to understand. People from minority ethnic and migrant backgrounds asked for more support to be given to help people coming to Scotland to learn English.

Those carrying out engagement and participation work should be trained and educated on the needs of specific groups, including marginalised and disadvantaged groups (for instance how best to engage and work with children), as well as in facilitation methods. Connected was the suggestion that well-resourced information and outreach work was important to support people to be involved in the Parliament's work, and that "Staff working with communities should be skilled in deliberative methods, human rights and equalities" (SCDC).

Educating people about their right to be heard and the importance of taking part was a common theme, linking into transparency and purpose. One participant at a focus group explained that as an immigrant they had no knowledge at all on their democratic rights in Scotland. It was suggested by a few people that the Scottish Parliament website should be aimed at a wider audience (i.e., not just 'experts'). Jane Jones suggested that Open University courses on, and developed with, the Scottish Parliament, would be beneficial (with some emphasis on the need for these to be accessible to those on low incomes through bursaries funded by the Parliament).

Alan Renwick of UCL said:

> "people need information. In part, that means information about the engagement processes in themselves: people need to know what they are

being asked to do and what will be done with the inputs that they provide. But there is a wider point: people will view the prospect of participating in a specific engagement exercise as very effortful if they feel alienated from politics more broadly: they will feel they do not know enough and that it will be hard work to keep up. So improving education and information about politics is vital."

He went on to share findings from the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK, which gave a very clear directive that in general, education on politics and democratic participation in the UK needs to be improved, and that many people feel ill-prepared by their formal education to engage with politics. It also found that most people feel that more needs to be done to make information on what is happening in Parliament and Government more accessible and available.

Accessibility

Simply increasing access to the democratic process was a common theme, with some people simply saying, 'make it easier for people to be involved'.

The EHRC said that "Compliance with the Equality Act and, specifically, the Public Sector Equality Duty will integrate consideration of non-discrimination, equality and good relations into the day-to-day business of the Scottish Parliament.", and that "data on the experiences of people sharing different protected characteristics who participate in all engagement activities should be collected, disaggregated without identifying individuals, published and used to tackle under-representation issues.". It asserted that "ongoing monitoring of equality data will help to measure the success of suggested improvements".

Zoom and other online forums were mentioned as opportunities to increase attendance numbers, with people citing their experience of increased participant numbers when some activities moved online during the pandemic. Conversely though, it was emphasised that non-digital means of engagement should be protected and maintained, and that "people who do not have digital access must be able to follow parliamentary proceedings and be given the same opportunities to contribute" (Age Scotland).

The need to work with specific groups (and community groups) on designing services and activities was made clear – quite simply, asking groups what works for them and taking a collaborative approach. There was also mention of making sure accessibility measures to support people with barriers to engagement were taken, such as making sure information is provided in different language options and different formats, including easy read, audio, large print and Braille. Audit Scotland suggested that developing a presence within community groups may be beneficial.

CRER spoke about the need to be able to accept evidence beyond the submission of a formal written document. Formality was a common theme, with the suggestion that breaking this down with more informal meetings and optics (fewer suits and uniforms, and less hierarchy of voices for example) could help people to feel more comfortable.

Relevance was emphasised by Together, quoting work done by the UN committee in relation to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In order to make participation accessible for children, the issues being discussed should be relevant to children, and delivered in a child-friendly way.

Practical barriers to participation, such as being able to take time to attend meetings (especially around working and childcare commitments), being able to afford to attend meeting (in terms of travel and costs related to time barriers), and overcoming technological barriers, should be mitigated for. Many respondents felt that funding specifically targeted at these barriers was needed to help those on low incomes participate. Suggestions around this included compensating people for their time, giving extra support for those with caring responsibilities, paying travel costs up front where necessary, and offering training and equipment to those who might lack the necessary IT skills to fully participate.

The Sortition Foundation suggested, interestingly, that ensuring that "remuneration is sufficient to attract people who are often both time- and cash-poor" could help to diversify not only the voices, but also the views heard. They gave the example of Scotland's Climate Assembly, where there was an unusually high response rate from people for whom climate change is not a significant issue. The assumption here is that, without the remuneration, it would be likely that only participants with a strong interest in climate change would have come forward.

Changes to the parliamentary timetable and week were suggested by CRER, which explained:

> "At times when there are few bills to be debated and voted upon, many (if not most) of the debates can be seen as tokenistic exercises, with MSPs voting along party lines and without a tangible outcome. It may be that this time could be better spent in committees, conducting site visits, meeting with civil society and constituents, or engaging with the public."

Going to people, rather than expecting them to come to the Parliament, was mentioned be a few respondents, though not as prominently or frequently as other measures of accessibility. Most pertinently, it was seen as a way of engaging with people in a space where they felt comfortable and already had access to. At a focus group session, All Highland and Island Disability Group spoke about using 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.".

Hubs would be informal and comfortable, and accessible transport would be made available to help people use them and could be used to signpost opportunities people to get involved in committee work and support people to access consultations and engagement processes. This was seen as a good way to overcome technological barriers.

Whilst most respondents spoke about making opportunities to participate accessible and overcoming educational/awareness barriers, newDemocracy suggested that "focusing citizens on the hardest part of a problem (through the remit/question), giving them the capability to select experts of their own choosing (not just being fed a pre-agreed list of speakers where perceptions of bias are unavoidable) and allowing them to self-write reports is fundamental.".

Recruitment of 'voices'

It was suggested that using diverse recruitment methods including door-knocking, roadshows, YouTube and TikTok videos promoting activities, talking to people in public places like shopping malls, having posters advertising opportunities in public spaces, and different presentations of invite materials, could help to diversify those taking part.

The use of sortition, civic lotteries and random selection, like the approach used for Jury Duty, was cited by several people in conjunction with discussion of establishing citizens' assemblies, panel and juries. As noted above, it was widely agreed that people should be paid for their time and able to take leave from work to participate in democratic processes. It was also suggested that it should be clear that those in receipt of benefits would lose them if they took time to participate. Random selection was seen as a very important step to diversifying voices and views, with a general feeling that self-selection led to repetitive, limited, and unrepresentative views.

Involve did, however, express that participation should be voluntary, explaining that "participation can be encouraged, supported and made more attractive, but it is inherently about a free choice to take part (or not) without coercion. People participate because they want to."

There was a nod to supporting sortition approaches to avoid exclusion. The Sortition Foundation gave the example of the National Digital Ethics People's Panel, which "actively supplemented its randomised recruitment approach with some direct recruitment from a group of people with less digital experience, who were being supported by a government initiative to become more digitally engaged."

CRER suggested that the Scottish Parliament could be "maintaining a list of community organisations which represent under-represented groups and issue specific invitations to respond to calls for evidence, submit briefings, or attend debates if relevant.", and said that clerks and colleagues should have more time to find new voices and incorporate these into inquiries and evidence sessions.

Age Scotland said that "widely advertising opportunities to feed into the work of the Parliament and work programme of Committees via a range of channels, including traditional print media and radio" was important. In a focus group with About Dementia, it was suggested that open days where people could visit and find out about how they could get involved in the work of the Parliament would be welcome.

Permanent structures for participation

There was a wide range of suggestions on models of participation, but they all had one main feature in common – in most cases these were seen as permanent, as opposed to ad-hoc, structures and approaches.

newDemocracy suggested a need to establish a permanent institution for citizen deliberation. They linked this to increasing trust:

> "Citizens tend to feel 'last in the queue' behind the bureaucracy and the professional political class (including lobbyists, media, advisors et al): trusting them enough to move them to the centre is core to changing this."

We had a lot of evidence around the role of community groups, and Forth Valley Migrant Support took this further by suggesting that permanent structures that helped to link and connect community groups to one another could help to unite communities.

Audit Scotland suggested that it would be good to:

> "build communities of practice: this can be done in many ways but key here is to reach out and keep hold (in terms of data/contacts/issue of interest) of who you are reaching out, and linking the different engagement initiatives together. One could see for instance different committees developing different communities of practice. Petitions can be a good way of reaching out to groups of people with an interest on a specific issue (though for that you'd need to put more emphasis on the need to collate signatures than you do now)."

Similarly, SCDC (among others) suggested "establishing lived experience panels consisting of marginalised groups, which can generate insight into what currently prevents people from participating in the parliament's work, and what can be done to support increased participation.", and that the Scottish Parliament "should support the growth of deliberative democracy, including the use of citizens assemblies to inform decision making in Scotland.".

Involve thought that the creation of a public panel to advise on the selection of committee witnesses could be useful, and that it would be interesting to see how this diverges from the lists currently collated by the clerks (*N.B. this was a statement based on their understanding of current committee processes*). The Sortition Foundation suggested there be a "diversity and inclusivity oversight citizens' panel" as a permanent structure to support participation and monitor actions and outcomes.

There were several mentions of the use of mini-publics, both as ad-hoc events and more permanent structures, and a need to make these more widespread. The suggestions of a Chamber of Citizens, shadow public panels (to mirror committee inquiries) and Citizens' Committees were given as possible approaches to establishing permanent models for participation, with the suggestion that this could "embed citizen participation and collective deliberation in the everyday work of the institution".

Oliver Escobar (Edinburgh University) mentioned some other participative approaches, but these were not widely cited - digital crowdsourcing, participatory budgeting and deliberative e-petitions.

As a slightly alternative approach, newDemocracy suggested that "most small advocacy groups and niche communities welcome the opportunity to be heard by a

jury of their peers rather than a bureaucracy which many of us strongly believe has their own views on a policy.".

Wider-reaching suggestions that the Scottish Parliament could play a role in included Jane Suiter (Dublin City University's) suggestion that:

"It would be useful to produce an overarching strategy for inclusion in parliament. This could begin with the adoption by the Scottish Government, Scottish Parliament, local government and the Open Government steering group or collective principles and values with a view to institutionalising participatory and deliberative democracy."

She also suggested that:

"Parliament could be even more ambitious and proactively seek a scrutiny role over government-initiated citizens' assemblies. For example, in Ireland in a number of instances, the parliament has commissioned a special Oireachtas or parliamentary committee to scrutinise the output of citizens' assemblies and to ensure the radiation of its recommendations. If this is not achievable then existing committees e.g. the Net Zero committee could take on a scrutiny and oversight role of governmental citizens' assemblies."

SCDC spoke about the Institutionalising Participatory and Deliberative Democracy Working Group, which recommended "that the Scottish Government embed participatory and deliberative democracy by committing to regular, carefully designed and well-resourced citizens assemblies, including an assembly for children and young people, as a key element of strengthening democracy in Scotland.". It called on the Scottish Parliament to collaborate closely in the development and delivery of the above, explaining:

"The key elements of the Scottish Parliament's involvement would be:

• Helping to establish and agree clear agenda setting guidelines for all Citizens' Assemblies
• Connecting in the Scottish Parliament Committee system as a means of scrutiny for Citizens' Assembly processes and recommendations
• Helping to establish an Oversight Board to review and guide democratic innovations
• In the longer term, considering the proposals of the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland for new infrastructure associated with the Scottish Parliament, including a Citizens' Chamber or Citizens' Committee
• The Scottish Parliament should ensure it has access to expertise, advice and support in the area of deliberative democracy.
• Committing to and implementing any recommendations from the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee for how the parliament utilises deliberative engagement."

Wider challenges and change

There were some suggestions clearly outwith the scope of this inquiry – these included a wider imbalance between "people and power", calls for further devolution

(particularly around immigration, benefits and pensions), decentralisation of power, a cultural change across society more widely towards participative democracy, and changes to the structure and operation of the civil service (including locating Govt. departments in more rural settings and using home-working more).

There were also suggestions that access to democratic processes should be restricted for 'opaque' lobbying groups (including those funded by or perceived to be funded by, Government), and that digital infrastructure across Scotland should be improved. These could be seen as more within the competence of the Scottish Parliament, but potentially outwith the areas where the Committee feels it has influence.

CRER noted that people who give evidence to the Scottish Parliament are usually experts in their field, and that barriers to employment and career advancement for BAME individuals is part of a wider societal issue which prevents people from ethnic minorities appearing before committees. It called on the Scottish Parliament to "use whatever power and influence it has to address this". As noted in key message 3, a lack of representation of diverse groups in politics is a barrier which goes far beyond the realms of the Scottish Parliament.

As could be expected based on some of the frustration expressed by respondents (see key message 1), there were calls for changes in political leadership, and pay reductions for both elected representatives and public/civil servants. Related to this, Stephen Elstub said "There are many reasons why trust is declining, but one of the contributing factors is the culture of politics in the Scottish Parliament, which is perceived as being elitist, competitive and combative."

Involve summed up the wider challenge in a context that goes beyond the status quo at the Scottish Parliament effectively, making it clear of the overall context which needs to be addressed:

> "Whilst the ambition of the Parliament to be accessible and welcoming is laudable, and it is more approachable than some other government / parliament buildings, it is nonetheless a symbol of power and patronage that many will find intimidating and will feel is not 'for them'
>
> …
>
> The way that government, parliament, policy development, consultation and engagement have been designed and developed means that it is not just typically under-represented groups that don't get involved in the work of the Parliament. Instead typical formal consultation structures tend to reinforce the voices of the already over-represented. The vast majority of 'ordinary' people do not have a reason, awareness or motivation to seek out these opportunities or see them as relevant if/when they come upon them. Just because it was possible for the public to contribute their views does not mean they are willing or able to act on that possibility. Many, particularly those under-represented groups, will not have had the time, inclination, resource, confidence, or enough faith that their contribution will influence the outcome."

Stephen Elstub (Newcastle University) used the wider context to give an optimistic and guiding message:

> "From our research through What Works Scotland, and various developments over the last decade, we understand the current moment of democracy around the world as era-defining. There is an ongoing global democratic recession and no political system is immune to this wave of upheaval. But there is also an emerging and vibrant field of democratic innovation which seeks to support the renewal of democracy. And from this evidence base we know that people still love the idea of democracy but despair at how it is practiced. The time for top-down, elite-driven institutions has passed. The governance of the future requires more networked, participatory and deliberative governance capable of grappling with the complexity of the issues we're facing in Scotland and globally. Therefore, Parliament should aim to become a house where different forms of democracy (e.g. representative, electoral, participatory, deliberative) are productively brought together to advance legislation and scrutiny."

Learning

Throughout the detailed survey in particular, people shared details of examples of engagement model that the Scottish Parliament could learn from, and useful research from a variety of sources.

Parallel work

One important thing to note is that a similar investigation on diversity and participation to the Committee's inquiry has been carried out by the Select Committee Engagement Team in the UK Parliament. In November 2019 they asked Dr Danielle Beswick from the University of Birmingham to produce a report on barriers to public participation in select committee events. The full report provided to the UK Parliament remains confidential, but a summary report was provided by Dr Beswick in response to the Committee's call for views. The barriers identified and measures to reduce those barriers match almost perfectly with the key messages and actions summarised above.

The project made a range of recommendations to the Select Committee Engagement Team based on the information gathered from individuals and organisations. These can be summarised as follows:

- Work more closely with community organisations and value their expertise – this means building in time to take their advice on how to reduce barriers, to reach people, and to support them to engage as they wish to. It also means supporting them with costs they incur in helping committees reach the public, and acknowledging their contribution to the work of parliament.
- Provide multiple opportunities to engage with committees – this means offering ways to engage in different formats, including online and face-to-face, in different locations and at different times. There is no one-size-fits-all way to reduce barriers, and flexibility is needed.
- Work to ensure that people have a positive experience when they engage – this includes reimbursing costs, providing refreshments and small tokens of appreciation where possible, using accessible venues and providing well trained facilitators to ensure people can share their experiences in the way they are most comfortable.
- Show people how their contributions can make a difference – develop clear, short case studies of what is possible. This could help organisations to overcome scepticism and justify the time spent on their work supporting parliament.

Based on this research, the Select Committee Engagement Team have committed to the following steps:

- Developing case studies of past engagement to host on their website. These will show how members of the public have been heard, and the results of this, in previous inquiries.
- Creating a new offer to community organisations, post Covid-19, to strengthen their capacity to engage with Parliament. This will include presentations, training, guidance on submitting evidence and tours.

- Working more closely with community organisations, particularly harnessing their expertise to focus on increasing accessibility and reducing barriers.
- Keeping people and organisations updated on all inquiries via a new newsletter.
- Holding both in person and virtual events post Covid-19, to add flexibility for participants.

RESEARCHERS NOTE: In carrying out analysis work, SPICe chose specifically to look at this piece of evidence post-analysis to ensure it did not skew our findings. From a research perspective the similarities here are reassuring; we can be confident to some extent that the messages, barriers and actions identified in this summary correspond with those from very similar research exercises. It also adds some weight to the evidence we've received that suggest the challenges faced by the Scottish Parliament are not unique and are widespread in democratic engagement.

Good practice examples

There were several examples of good practice and examples to explore and learn from, which are summarised below. A section at the end of this summary details the suggested further reading people shared.

Audit Scotland said:

"there is a range of good practice across the public and third sector, with new ways of engaging and learning emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic. We have included good examples of organisations working in a creative or supportive way to with under-represented groups in our own work:

- [Principles for community empowerment](#) – case studies (page 16-22)
- [Community empowerment: Covid-19 update](#) – examples of learning from communities during the pandemic -
- [Local government in Scotland overview 2022](#) - Meeting local needs: collaboration and communities (page 41-43)

Relevant external sources of good practice referenced in our reports include:

- Pooling Together: How community hubs have responded to the Covid-19 emergency (Carnegie UK Trust)
- COVID-19 and Communities Listening Project: A Shared Response (Carnegie UK Trust)
- Rethinking Scotland: Action required to include more voices in policy-making in Scotland (Carnegie UK Trust)

- Community health and wellbeing: sustaining and strengthening the role of community organisations beyond the initial Covid-19 response (Nesta, Healthcare Improvement Scotland, ihub)
- If Not Now, When? The Social Renewal Advisory Board Report
- Manifesto for Change – Creating a fairer future for Scotland (Third Sector Interface Scotland Network)
- Engaging differently – how to carry out meaningful digital and at-a-distance engagement (Healthcare Improvement Scotland)
- Planning with people – community engagement and participation guidance (Scottish Government, COSLA)

Some external resources to highlight for effective engagement and participation include:

- National standards for community engagement – good practice principles to support community engagement.
- Gunning Principles for fair and effective public consultation
- Human rights-based approach to involving people in decisions that affect their rights"

The SCDC gave recent examples of policy being co-designed by those with lived experience:

• The development of the Social Security Charter and the use of experience panels to build a social security system which at one point achieved a 90% satisfaction rate. The Social Justice and Fairness Commission highlighted that "[t]he use of Experience Panels to design and implement a new social security system in Scotland based on dignity, fairness and respect is an example of inclusive decision-making; of the government developing policy with people it is there to serve, not just for them."

• All In For Change, the approach to tackling homelessness in Scotland, led by Homeless Network Scotland, Cyrenians and Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC), which put lived experience at the heart of system change by bringing together frontline workers and people with their own, personal experience of homelessness either currently or in the past.

• The City of Glasgow's piloting of participatory budgeting designed by equality groups in four areas across the city in 2018/19. The pilots adopted a citizens' panel approach to PB, where small groups of community members represented the wider community in the planning, development and implementation of the overall PB process.

• The Feeley report into health and social care also benefitted from extensive engagement events and discussions with a range of stakeholders involved in social care across Scotland. We believe this should be built on further in the development of the Structure of Standards and Processes.

The EHRC said "The Scottish Government's Equality Data Improvement Programme (EDIP) is working on a revised equality evidence strategy to strengthen its approach

to improving Scotland's equality evidence base. This could potentially help to ensure harmonised standards and inform what participant data should be collected.".

It also highlighted that "Section 106 of the Equality Act, although not yet enacted, also provides some useful guiding principles on collection of data on political candidates which may be useful for the Committee to consider.".

Healthcare Improvement Scotland drew the Committee's attention to the following good practice resources on their website:

- "How to engage effectively, which has a list of question prompts for organisations to consider, such as '*what do you need to know?*', '*who should be involved?*' etc.

- Equality and diversity, which has information about how an EQIA can help identify who should be involved in engagement activities

- Identifying and understanding stakeholders, which includes useful templates and guidance

- Our Service Change Resources section, which has links to guides and short animations about understanding impact, considering potential barriers to engagement, and more"

At the focus group session with Bridgend Farmhouse Volunteer Forum, which included people who have experience of a disability and/or living on a low income, we saw how they have introduced a method of working with the group called Sociocratic decision making. The aim of this is to fairly and equally, hear everyone in the groups voice and to share their views and opinions. Two members of the group will lead the session and ask the group to answer to the two main questions. The aim is that the group will discuss and come to a consensus, making a decision, in a "fair" and inclusive way. In this case, this method was used to discuss the questions posed by the Committee.

Finally, Conversation Cafes were seen as a good model to replicate for engagement,

Training and education

Some of the specific examples of effective participant training we were given (by SCDC) included:

• The training provided to members of the Citizens Assembly of Scotland around deliberative dialogue, governance and decision making in Scotland, and other aspects of society and politics in Scotland.

• The Health Issues in the Community (HIIC) course which supports people to see their own lives and health in the context of wider society, including how health is impacted on by inequality. This training is overseen by SCDC and is rolled out by trained tutors in their own communities. As a result of the training, HIIC participants regularly become more active in their communities, whether volunteering, forming new community groups or participating in planning and decision-making structures.

Examples from other parliaments and public bodies

Knowledge of who to recruit, and learning from other Parliament's approaches, was emphasised. Christina Leston-Bandeira (Leeds University) said:

> "Something that other parliaments have done is to get a clearer understanding of their populations, and then target the engagement activity in response. For example, the UK parliament engagement and petitions teams use a library briefing that identifies key groups that are less likely to engage; this then helps teams across the house to specifically try to target those. The Northern Ireland Assembly used census data for a clearer understanding of population groups; this helped them understand who was already engaging with them, and where those who weren't, were. They used this approach specifically to support the scrutiny of the Bill of Rights."

CRER said:

> "The Scottish Parliament should consider the establishment of an equivalent to the House of Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion. This will offer intentionality to the work of the Scottish Parliament in this area and will allow a variety of issues to be considered and acted upon. A new body, we believe, is necessary to lead the way forward and challenge attitudes and prejudices that may limit the diversity and inclusion of the Scottish Parliament."

CRER, in discussing the parliamentary timetable, suggested that:

> "a model such as that which has been used by the European Parliament – in which the parliamentary calendar is divided between meetings of political groups, committee meetings, plenary sessions, and work outside of parliament – could be considered."

The Ostbelgien Parliament's approach to the use of citizens' assemblies was highlighted by Stephen Elstub as an example of a model worth looking at in some detail (see suggested further reading), with an exploration of which specific lessons the Scottish Parliament could adopt detailed in his full submission.

DemocracyNext explained that:

> "To ensure citizens from all walks of life are continuously involved in public decision making, the Francophone Brussels Parliament has established Deliberative Committees. These are first mixed committees, comprised of 45 randomly selected citizens and 15 MPs, where citizens and members of parliament deliberate and come up with recommendations to the regional parliament about specific policy issues. Such committees can be initiated by MPs or citizens (by collecting 1000 signatures)."

The model of [direct democracy used in Iceland](#) was also mentioned as aspirational (within the short survey).

The EHRC said "The Scottish Government's [recent evidence synthesis](#) on using intersectionality to understand structural inequality in Scotland is useful in terms of

explaining the concept of intersectionality, and how it can be applied to policymaking and analysis.".

The Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK – which brought together a UK-wide representative group of 67 people over six weekends in autumn 2021 to examine what kind of democracy people wanted – was mentioned in a number of submissions.

Other examples of deliberative democracy cited were Scotland's Climate Assembly, and the National Digital Ethics People's Panel.

Suggesting that there be a Scottish People's College, Jane Jones spoke about the Scottish Popular Education Forum (PEF), which "was run for over 10 years from the 1990's by community activists, community development workers, community and adult education workers and academics in Edinburgh and Glasgow Universities and rested on voluntary commitment. Weekend schools were held in Edinburgh, New Lanark, Stirling and Aberdeen. What we knew was needed was some central resources from Government but at that time it was not to happen."

Sortition approaches

Representative sampling as part of a sortition process was mentioned, with the Sortition Foundation explaining its approach to recruitment for the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK:

> "We sent out 80% of recruitment letters to random addresses in the Royal Mail's Postcode Address File, while the remaining 20% were targeted at random addresses from within the three most deprived deciles of the Index of Multiple Deprivation. This latter step was done in order to elicit responses from groups whose voices have traditionally been underrepresented in both politics and deliberative exercises. We then selected from respondents to ensure a representative sample overall."

Suggested further reading

This section is a collation of articles, research, links and books respondents suggested, outside those already mentioned under 'Learning'. The Committee and the Scottish Parliament's participation and engagement teams may find these sources useful further along the scrutiny and deliberation process.

Academic studies and articles

Hugh Bochel and Anouk Berthier - Committees and Witnesses in the Scottish Parliament: Beyond the 'Usual Suspects'? Scottish Affairs 30.3 (2021)

Carman, C. (2010) 'The Process is the Reality: Perceptions of Procedural Fairness and Participatory Democracy', Political Studies, 58, 731-751.

Curtice, J. (2005) 'Restoring Confidence and Legitimacy? Devolution and Public Opinion', in A. Trench (ed.), Has Devolution Made a Difference? London: Constitution Unit, pp. 217–35.

Elstub S and Carrick J. (2020) Comparing Mini-Publics in the Scottish Parliament. Newcastle upon Tyne: Newcastle University.

Elstub S, Carrick J, Khoban Z. (2021) Democratic Innovation in the Scottish Parliament: An Evaluation of Committee Mini-Publics. Scottish Affairs, 30(4), 493-521.

Elstub, S. & Escobar, O. (eds.) 2019. Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance, Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar.

Elstub S, Carrick J, and Khoban Z. (2019) Evaluation of the Scottish Parliament's Citizens' Jury on Land Management and the Natural Environment. Newcastle upon Tyne: Newcastle University.

Escobar, O. 2021. Between radical aspirations and pragmatic challenges: Institutionalizing participatory governance in Scotland. Critical Policy Studies, 1-16.

Escobar O. and Elstub S. (2017) Forms of mini-publics: An introduction to deliberative innovations in democratic practice. newDEMOCRACY. Research and Development Notes.

Escobar, O. and Elstub, S. (2017) Deliberative innovations: Using 'mini-publics' to improve participation and deliberation at the Scottish Parliament, prepared for the Scottish Parliament Commission on Parliamentary Reform.

Escobar, O., F. Garven, C. Harkins, K. Glazik, S. Cameron, & A. Stoddart (2018) 'Participatory budgeting in Scotland: The interplay of public service reform, community empowerment and social justice', in N. Dias (Ed.), Hope for democracy: 30 years of participatory budgeting worldwide, Faro, Portugal: Oficina, pp. 311-336.

Henderson, J., Escobar, O. & Revell, P. 2020. Public value governance meets social commons: community anchor organisations as catalysts for public service reform and social change? Local Government Studies, 1-23.

Henderson, J., Revell, P. and Escobar, O. (2018) Transforming communities? Exploring the roles of community anchor organisations in public service reform, local democracy, community resilience and social change, Edinburgh: What Works Scotland.

Lightbody, R. 2017. 'Hard to reach' or 'easy to ignore'? Promoting equality in community engagement. Edinburgh: What Works Scotland.

Lightbody, R. & Escobar, O. 2021. Equality in Community Engagement: A Scoping Review of Evidence from Research and Practice in Scotland. Scottish affairs, 30, 355-380.

Lowndes, V., Pratchett, L. and Stoker, G. (2006) 'Diagnosing and remedying the failings of official participation schemes: the CLEAR framework' Social Policy and Society, Vol 5, No 2 pp281-91.

Mccartney, G., Dickie, E., Escobar, O. & Collins, C. 2021. Health inequalities, fundamental causes and power: Towards the practice of good theory. Sociology of Health & Illness, 43, 20-39.

McCrone, D. (2019) 'Peeble them wi' stanes: Twenty years of the Scottish Parliament', Scottish Affairs, 28(2)

Niessen, C. and Reuchamps, M. (2022) 'Institutionalising Citizen Deliberation in Parliament: The Permanent Citizens' Dialogue in the German-speaking Community of Belgium', Parliamentary Affairs, 75(1), 135–153.

Nugent, B. and Escobar, O. (2017) Fun, Food and Folk - The Centrestage approach to dignified food provision, Edinburgh: What Works Scotland.

Urie, A., Mcneill, F., Cathcart-Froden, L., Collinson Scott, J., Crockett Thomas, P., Escobar, O., Macleod, S. & Mckerracher, G. 2019. Reintegration, Hospitality and Hostility: Song-writing and song-sharing in criminal justice. Journal of Extreme Anthropology, 3, 77-101.

van der Meer, T. (2022) 'Political Trust and the "Crisis of Democracy".' Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics.

Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., and Brady, H. E. (1995) Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Parliamentary, Government and Commission reports and sources

Commission on Parliamentary Reform (2017). Report on the Scottish Parliament. Edinburgh: Commission on Parliamentary Reform.

The Scottish Parliament Participation Handbook (2004)

The Scottish Government's Report from the Institutionalising Participatory and Deliberative Democracy Working Group (2022)

The Scottish Government: Social Attitudes 2019: attitudes to government and political engagement

The Scottish Government's [Social Security Charter](#)

Web sources and links

Accounts Commission: [The digital divide – inequality in a digital world](#)

Accounts Commission: [Digital progress in local government](#)

Accounts Commission: [Principles for community empowerment](#)

EHRC: [Measurement framework](#) for equality and human rights

EHRC: [Services, Public Functions and Associations Statutory Code of Practice](#)

Electoral Reform Society: [What is a citizens' assembly](#)

Electoral Reform Society: [Democracy Max - A vision for a good Scottish democracy](#)

Electoral Reform Society, Our Democracy & The Coalfields Regeneration Trust: [Act as if we own the place](#)

Healthcare Improvement Scotland: [Gathering Views](#)

Healthcare Improvement Scotland: [Citizens' Panel](#)

Healthcare Improvement Scotland: [Citizens' Jury](#)

Healthcare Improvement Scotland: [Engaging Differently](#)

Healthcare Improvement Scotland: [work on involving young people and children](#).

[Interview with Magali Plovie, President of the Francophone Brussels Parliament](#).

The Jimmy Reid Foundation: [The Silent Crisis: Failure and Revival in Local Democracy in Scotland](#)

John Smith Centre: [The Age Gap: Young People and Trust](#)

NESTA: [Innovation in policy: allowing for complexity and uncertainty in government](#)

OECD: [Eight ways to institutionalise deliberative democracy](#)

OECD: [Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions](#). Includes close to 600 examples of representative deliberative processes where public authorities have brought together diverse groups of citizens to learn, deliberate, and tackle complex policy problems.

RSA: [Transitions to participatory democracy](#)

Sortition Foundation: [A House of Citizens for the Scottish Parliament](#)

TFN: [What's behind the missing million voters?](#)

Together: [State of Children's Rights Report for 2022](#).

Together: [Rights Right Now!](#)

Voice Scotland: [National Standards for Community Engagement](#)

Books

Cairney, P. and McGarvey, N. Scottish Politics (2013)

Mia Kellmer Pringle's 'The needs of Children' (1980)

Gerri Kirkwood and Colin Kirkwood's 'Living Adult Education: Freire in Scotland' (2011)

Pete Senge's 'The Fifth Discipline' (specifically the concept of The Learning Organisation) (1990)

Willie Sullivan's The Missing Scotland' (2014)

Organisations and groups that provided evidence, or helped us to gather evidence

About Dementia

Active Inquiry

Age Scotland

All Highland and Island Disability Groups

Audit Scotland

Bridgend Farmhouse

Connecting Craigmillar

Constitution Unit, University College London

Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights (CRER)

DemocracyNext

Democratic Society

EHRC

Electoral Reform Society Scotland

Healthcare Improvement Scotland – Community Engagement

Forth Valley Migrant Support

Involve

Learning Disability Assembly

newDemocracy Foundation (Australia)

People First (Scotland)

Regional Equality Councils

RNIB Scotland

The RSA

Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC)

Sortition Foundation

Tenant Participation Advisory Service Scotland

Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights)

NB. Three submissions came from individuals representing organisations who wished to remain anonymous.