



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

SPICe

The Information Centre
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

Scottish Parliament Academic Fellowship Scheme 2024/25

Applying participatory action research and/or arts-based methodologies to the committee scrutiny process within the Scottish Parliament

Introduction

The [Scottish Parliament's strategic plan](#) outlines that citizen participation is part of its aim to be “a modern, dynamic parliamentary democracy.” This is further supported by the [Parliament's engagement strategy](#) which aims to:

- Increase the reach of the Parliament's engagement and the diversity of those engaging with us.
- Improve the knowledge and confidence of people to engage with us and with the democratic process.
- Improve the Parliament's reputation as a relevant and trusted institution.

These aims have been strengthened by a mandate from the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee to look to institutionalise deliberative democracy in the work of the Scottish Parliament, and work is ongoing to build a blueprint to deliver this aspiration in Session 7 of the Parliament (from 2026 onwards).

Fellowship outline

We are looking for a fellowship placement to complement this work by helping us to understand how we can best facilitate the gathering of evidence in diverse and creative formats from participative and deliberative activities, and effectively build this into the body of evidence upon which Parliamentary Committees base their scrutiny and use to inform their recommendations to the Scottish Government. This timely fellowship complements the Scottish Parliament's 25th anniversary focus of looking towards the Parliament of the future and considering how scrutiny might evolve and develop.

The ideal candidate will have established skills in using participative action research to explore issues on an immersive basis, which will allow them to pilot and evaluate different evidence-gathering, collation and analysis approaches. Ideally, candidates will also have experience in using arts-based methodologies to gather views and lived experience, and in engaging with and co-designing participative events with vulnerable and hard-to-reach communities. We are open to candidates from varying academic fields, and at different levels including early career stages. PhD students may also be considered if their research and practice background and academic supervision aligns strongly with the skillset needed for the project. We see this as a

valuable opportunity for candidates from outside of the social and political science fields to engage in the work of the Scottish Parliament.

Context - Inquiry into public participation

One of the key themes of participative democracy and engagement is whether the engagement process has a meaningful impact on the outcomes of an inquiry. The Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee heard early on in its [inquiry into public participation](#) that this ties in heavily to both incentives to participate, and to the extent to which there is trust in the process. Put simply, people are more likely to engage with the work of the Scottish Parliament if they feel like their voice matters. They will trust in the process more if the outcome is one of meaningful impact.

As part of the Committee's work, it formed a Citizens' Panel of members of the public to answer the question, "How can the Scottish Parliament ensure that diverse voices and communities from all parts of Scotland influence our work?". [The panel came up with 17 recommendations.](#)

The Committee set out its vision for embedding deliberative democracy in the work of the Scottish Parliament [in its final report](#) in September 2023, [agreeing to the majority of the panel's recommendations](#), at least in principle. Most significantly, the Committee concluded that [the Parliament should use Citizens' Panels more regularly to help committees with scrutiny work](#), and made several recommendations for pilot and preparatory work, with certain guiding principles. The expectation is that, by the end of Session 6, the Committee will recommend a model that the Parliament can use after the 2026 Scottish election. The Committee concluded:

- That deliberative democracy should **complement the existing model of representative democracy** and be used to **support the scrutiny process**.
- That the way in which deliberative methods are used, from recruitment through to reporting and feedback, should be **transparent** and **subject to a governance and accountability framework**.
- That the deliberative methods used should be **proportionate and relevant** to the topic, and the scrutiny context.
- That participants in deliberative democracy should be **supported, empowered and given feedback** on how their recommendations are used.

The Committee stated that it expected several strands of work to take place to support its drafting of "a further report that we expect to publish and have debated by mid/late 2025 – a report that, if it is endorsed by MSPs generally, can provide the blueprint for the Parliament's use of deliberative democracy from the beginning of Session 7 onwards".

Work is ongoing in various areas of the Parliamentary service to understand the implications of realising the Committees' aspirations and forming a blueprint. This includes:

- Pilot work commissioned by the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee exploring the applications of people's panels.

Experimental approaches such as applying a deliberative process to budget scrutiny, working alongside stakeholder panels throughout the committee inquiry process from context setting through to suggesting recommendations, and using lived experience panels to explore the private rental sector.

- Work within the Participation and Communities Team (PACT) to establish and streamline commissioning processes, a payment for participation policy, and a framework for measuring the impact of participation.

Work within the Scottish Parliament Research Centre (SPICe) to understand the role of researchers alongside PACT work as demand grows, and how both offices work with committee clerks and support staff from across the organisation.

Previous fellowships supporting this work have included-

- [Dr Adam Chalmers' work](#) based on using data analysis to better understand the use and impact of written evidence, which is gathered through both open calls for views and specific digital participation exercises.
- [Dr Ruth Lightbody's work](#) which explored what the core guiding principles in applying deliberative approaches might be, and how these might be measured.

Background – current practice

Committees are typically supported by a team of staff from several different specialisms when undertaking inquiries and other scrutiny work. This includes:

- Committee Clerks, who manage the committees' work programmes, provide advice and support to the committees and their conveners, and draft committee correspondence and reports. Clerks are usually the main point of contact when people engage with committees.
- Researchers from the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe), who provide research support through the work planning and scrutiny process. This includes helping committees to scope out inquiry approaches, providing background briefings, advising on the evidence-taking approaches committees use, and summarising evidence throughout the inquiry process.

Participation specialists, who advise on and support any engagement, participation, and deliberative approaches that committees choose to include in their scrutiny process, including building parliamentary awareness among participants. These specialists also have strong third sector links and provide support to help committees engage with vulnerable witnesses.

- Communications specialists, who help committees to raise awareness of their work and promote opportunities for citizens to participate.

Committee inquiries are a factfinding, deliberation and reporting process carried out by Parliamentary Committees, usually either on an area of interest/concern, to support the passage of legislation, or to reflect on the outcomes of past legislation. The time available for inquiries can vary, ranging from a few weeks to several months, and can be constrained by competing commitments (which will also impact

staffing resource). This means that the length of time and resource available to gather and analyse evidence can also vary a great deal.

Traditionally, committees have gathered evidence through ‘calls for views’ (usually a set of questions on a theme, often eliciting expert knowledge or lived/living experience perspectives), which are staged on a digital platform, and through oral evidence during formal committee sessions. This evidence base is usually analysed by researchers and used to inform the progression of an inquiry.

To complement this, the Parliament has been building expertise in participatory and deliberative approaches for several years, and now has a dedicated and highly skilled deliberative team who facilitate in-person and online engagement.

One of the key benefits of this shift has been making scrutiny more accessible to the wider public – more individual voices and lived experience comes through in evidence, and there is less reliance on the ‘usual suspects’ in supporting scrutiny.

However, there remain challenges in effectively capturing the ‘evidence’ from certain methods.

Capturing workshop discussions and presenting the large amounts of data and wide ranges of views can be resource intensive and challenging to incorporate into briefings and reports, meaning that it runs the risk of being seen as of lesser importance than the written and oral evidence gathered through traditional methods. The traditional methods of calls for views and oral evidence tend to attract and favour ‘expert’ witnesses, and, as [the Commission on Parliamentary Reform](#) noted (at Para 55 and 274) there is a view that formal evidence has a higher status than that gathered through engagement and participation-based means. This has not changed significantly since the Commission reported in 2017.

There is also still a reliance on verbal forms of communication, including during participation work, and little practical experience of using visual formats, in both imparting information and capturing views. Committee Members report benefiting a great deal from meeting and talking to citizens about topical issues but capturing this experience in the reporting process can be difficult, and it is not always possible to demonstrate clearly how citizens’ contributions have impacted on the work of committees.

The project and key skills

Building on the Parliament’s strong grounding in participative practice and high-quality research expertise, this project will seek to understand how learning from techniques from the arts and humanities schools in academia could be applied and scaled within the committee scrutiny process.

The Parliamentary service would benefit from gaining a better understanding of:

- How to design engagement and participation activities in a way which facilitates and supports the gathering of evidence for committees, in a way which is accessible to citizens (including across a range of communication styles).

- How to gather evidence during these activities in a way which is complementary to the aims of encouraging citizen engagement.
- How evidence beyond the 'traditional' verbal question and answer model can be used and captured, particularly when supporting vulnerable and minority groups to engage in scrutiny. For instance, how might storytelling, poetry or visual arts be used to capture lived experience?
- How to collate and analyse this evidence effectively so that the impact of participative approaches on committee scrutiny can be more clearly evidenced and understood.
- Potential commentary on the status and role of evidence from participation and deliberative methods as compared to that from 'formal' evidence, and whether the traditional hierarchy of evidence formats remains appropriate.

This would involve a specialist with strong experience of using participative action research and/or arts-based methodologies in academic research first gaining a grounding in existing Parliamentary practice and skillsets to fully understand the role of evidence in scrutiny and the actors involved in its collection, collation, analysis, scrutiny and use in committee outputs.

We would then hope to see an identification of where learning from academic research methodologies could be carried across to support and grow our practice. This may involve, in collaboration with Parliamentary staff, the development and piloting of bespoke research methods within the scrutiny process. Our expectation is that the work will result in a series of practice and CPD recommendations for Participation and Research services to develop in partnership in advance of agreeing the Participation Blueprint for Session 7.

We expect candidates to identify and propose their own research methods, but this should ideally involve some time working from the Scottish Parliament on an immersive basis, alongside research and participation services, in order to understand our process, demands, skills and working techniques. It may also involve survey or interview-based techniques to gather a wide range of experience of current practice.

Timeframe, working pattern and output

The hope is that the fellowship **will commence with inception planning in June 2024, and begin fully in September 2024**. Given that there is an immersive aspect, and we hope to have the successful candidate work alongside us, this would allow for shadowing, participation in delivery and information gathering to occur in the Autumn term between September and early-October, and for a final report and recommendations to be available by the end of 2024. This represents a 3-month period, but we recognise that this may be optimistic if a project is to involve trialling new methods and/or CPD approaches

Typically, a **time commitment of an average of 1.5 days a week** would be expected, with more time needed in the earlier part of the project. We expect the successful candidate to be able to work from the SPICe office at The Scottish Parliament for 1-2 days per week (ideally on Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday)

during the autumn term. Both the timeframe and working pattern are open to discussion based on academic commitments and further scoping of the projects.

The fellowship placement would see the successful candidate working alongside both the Financial Scrutiny Unit and Participation and Communities Team in a collaborative manner, with the project co-managed by a Senior Researcher and Senior Participation Specialist.

The output would be agreed at the outset, but this is likely to involve a blog on SPICe Spotlight, a final research briefing containing practice recommendations, and potential presentation to wider staffing groups across relevant offices and/or at one of our SPICe breakfast seminars (which are open to all MSPs and Parliament staff).

Funding

It is up to the prospective fellow and their academic institution to set out the basis upon which their costs are determined and the sources of their funding.

Although funding cannot be guaranteed, the Parliament does, however, have a limited budget which it can potentially use to fund or part-fund fellows (previously, funding provided has typically been between £3-4,000). We can discuss funding in more detail with applicants once applications have been submitted and assessed.