

Evaluation of the work undertaken by the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

**Professor Sabina Siebert
University of Glasgow**

2023

This report contains evaluation of the work by the Citizens' Panel on Participation, which was established by the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee in order to gather views on the barriers that exist to people participating in the work of the Parliament.

The overarching question asked by the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee was:

How can the Scottish Parliament ensure that diverse voices and communities from all parts of Scotland influence our work?

Methodology underpinning the evaluation

In advance of the Citizens' Panel meetings, I was provided with a comprehensive set of documents: an overview of the design and Steering Group processes; [a summary of the Participation Inquiry survey responses](#); a summary of the discussions of the Kurdish and Syrian diasporas; a link to [the Participation Inquiry Citizens' Panel website](#); and an overview of the participant recruitment process.

Starting from 28th October, I observed the Citizens' Panel meetings on the following dates:

- 28 October (in person in the Parliament)
- 29 October (in person in the Parliament)
- 30 October (in person in the Parliament)
- 19 November (in person in the Parliament)
- 20 November (in person in the Parliament)
- 10 November (online)
- 17 November (online)

The original dates planned for September and October 2022 were changed due to the period of national mourning following the death of Queen Elizabeth II. During the first meeting of the Citizens' Panel, I surveyed participants on their expectations of the meetings, their motivations, and their experiences of engaging with Parliament and its representatives.

As a non-participant observer, I followed an observation schedule guided by the following questions:

How were the meetings chaired and facilitated?

Was the manner of facilitation inclusive?

Were the participants encouraged to speak?

Were the meetings dominated by some participants, or was everyone given a chance to speak?

Were the questions asked clear and not biased to any particular agenda?

Was the Citizens' Panel representative of the Scottish citizens?

Did the members broadly reflect the demographics of Scotland?

During the in-person events on 19–20th November, I conducted short interviews with participants about their experiences of being on the Panel and how they felt about the process of producing recommendations.

In December 2022 and January 2023, I conducted interviews with the Citizens' Panel facilitators, gathering their reflections on the organization of the events and the process of facilitating the meetings. These interviews enabled me to gain deeper insights into the process and outcomes, and helped me formulate some "lessons learned" for future events.

My evaluation is structured according to five main topics: (1) Participant recruitment; (2) Evidence provision; (3) Design and facilitation; (4) Impact on the participants; (5) Impact on Parliament.

Participant recruitment

Participation recruitment followed clear and robust methodology. Sortition Foundation worked with the Scottish Parliament and was tasked with recruiting participants. The process followed a two-stage sortition template that conforms to the OECD good practice principles for deliberative processes for public decision making.

The selection included consideration of gender, age, ethnicity, disability and geographical distributions across all of the regions of Scotland. Twenty-four Panel members from the pool of 159 potential members were selected, ensuring that the group of participants was diverse, and broadly constituted a diverse snapshot of the people of Scotland.

The final group consisted of 19 participants as five of the original group dropped out for health reasons or were unable to attend on the rescheduled dates. The change of schedule was necessitated by the period of national mourning following the death of Queen Elizabeth II. Also, a period of railway disruptions caused by industrial action and adverse weather conditions affected the drop-out rate.

The facilitators commented on the higher than expected drop-out rate among younger participants. Similarly, people with lower educational achievement were less likely to respond to letters and surveys, therefore in the future more effort could be put into face-to-face communication to engage these groups. This is, however, a very resource-intensive solution.

It is never possible to safeguard against drop-out entirely, though in the future reserve lists could be used to mitigate against cancellations.

Better communication and a realistic preview of the process were also identified as key lessons learned. For example, some participants expressed a view that more information on the makeup of the Panel and the schedule of the in-person meetings would have allayed their concerns. A Teams or Zoom call with each participant might help establish connection and enable the team to prepare the participants for the diversity of voices and experiences.

Recommendation: Better use of reserve lists to mitigate against cancellations, especially among the under-represented and harder to reach sections of society.

Evidence provision

The selection of witnesses invited to speak to the Panel was excellent, and enabled the participants to interact with a wide range of Parliamentary stakeholders, namely: MSPs, Parliamentary clerks, the Chief Executive of the Scottish Parliament, and academics with expertise in Parliamentary affairs.

Information was presented in a robust and balanced way, and the speakers provided crucial information needed to answer the question: How can the Scottish Parliament ensure that diverse voices and communities from all parts of Scotland influence our work? The topics discussed by witnesses included the differences between the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament, the role of MSPs, trust in politicians, transparency of processes and the role of mini publics.

The participants were informed of the existing barriers to participation (such as the lack resources, lack of time, or distrust of politicians), but also of the problems related to the intersectionality of barriers. The Panel members asked insightful questions about distrust of politicians, low election turnouts, low levels of engagement by people from low income groups. A question was posed asking participants to reflect on whether it is the responsibility of the individual to engage in politics or only the Parliament's responsibility. Some participants emphasized that formulating questions for those providing evidence was as important as listening to the witnesses' responses. This is where the briefing sessions with the facilitators were helpful in making the participants understand the position of the witnesses, their expertise, and the remit of their roles within the Parliament. Based on these briefing sessions, the participants were able to pose more meaningful questions.

The high standing of some of the speakers was perceived as a signal of seriousness of the initiative and gave the participants confidence that their recommendations would be taken onboard.

Some participants suggested a need for clearer information on the structure of the deliberative events in advance of the weekend meetings. Although the participants enjoyed the first week of the Panel meetings and found them useful, at times they felt overwhelmed by the amount of information presented to them. In particular, the online session on 10th November 2022 was seen as intensive and feedback suggested it could have been more interactive. On a practical note, the participants found the Friday in-person sessions challenging due to the evening scheduling. An earlier finish of the evening sessions would have been welcome.

Recommendation: To address the issue of information overload, the team may consider diversifying the modes of delivery, perhaps introducing more audio-visual material to complement the talks.

Design and facilitation

The Citizen's Panel, in consultation with an [expert steering group](#), was designed by a core delivery team made up of staff from the Scottish Parliament's Participation and Communities Team (PACT) and the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe), who worked with the wider PACT team and committee clerks to deliver the Panel events. This also involved consultation with and involvement of the Parliamentary Communications Office and Public Information team, as well as practical support from colleagues in security and visitor services, and the support of Parliamentary events assistants.

In advance of the in-person meetings, the staff from PACT booked travel and accommodation for the participants, escorted them from the hotel and booked taxis.

The Panel meetings were facilitated professionally. At all times the facilitators were engaging, responding to the Panel's questions, and remained mindful of the differences in the participants' prior experiences of the democratic processes.

There was evidence of advance planning and excellent facilitation skills. The facilitation was inclusive, and all members of the Panel were encouraged to speak. By discussing deliberative tips and agreeing conversation guidelines, both the facilitators and the participants ensured a respectful debate. Through reasoning and discussion, the participants were encouraged to make well-justified judgements.

Excellent use was made of the breakout rooms in Parliament and online. These enabled the less confident participants to speak. When attempts to dominate the discussions were made by one of the participants, and the other participants were negatively affected, the facilitators dealt with the situation politely and professionally. In the aftermath, the facilitators reflected on the need to ensure adequate safeguarding of all participants, and the need to prepare for possible disruptive behaviour from individuals.

The materials distributed during the sessions were clear, accessible and appropriate.

The facilitators conducted an initial survey to understand people's prior experiences of political engagement and remained mindful of it throughout the meetings.

The participants' voices were heard and taken onboard, and the team proactively engaged in continuous improvement, i.e. the information overload was reduced in the subsequent sessions, and the evening session shortened in response to the concerns raised. Participants were given the opportunity to shape the content of the online sessions and the second weekend's activities.

Especially noteworthy was the way in which facilitators catered for the mixed audience – a very diverse group of people with very different levels of experience of democratic institutions.

Impact on participants

Taking part in the Panel was a life-changing experience for most of the participants. In the interviews I conducted they emphasized how much they learned from the process about the workings of the Parliament and modes of participation in politics. Some admitted that they felt sceptical about their willingness to engage in the work of Parliament, but changed their perspective entirely thanks to being on the Citizens' Panel. The event was also a bonding experience for the participants on a personal level, with some noting that they "made friends for life" and expanded their social networks. This suggests that the gains from participation were greater than the stated aim of producing recommendations for the inquiry.

Most of the interviewees commented on a change in their attitude to participation in democracy, including greater trust in politicians and political processes, increased confidence in approaching their representatives in constituency offices, and willingness to attend committee meetings or to give evidence. Their involvement is likely to be on an issue-by-issue basis, but the new enthusiasm can be interpreted as increased confidence and trust.

Familiarity with the Parliament building was an important part of this process. Being able to deliberate in the Committee Rooms or the Debating Chamber made the participants more confident and made the Parliament more welcoming and accessible to them. They noted that being welcomed into the building for the Panel meetings made them feel included in the democratic process.

During the final stage of the deliberative event on Sunday 20th November 2022, when the recommendations were produced, the participants demonstrated ownership of the final document and, as one interviewee noted, the process allowed them "to see beyond their own barriers and their own cynicism". The facilitation of this session was exemplary. A few participants, inspired by the process, signalled their wish to continue the engagement by signing up to Parliament notifications. This is when the enthusiasm was most pronounced.

Two participants raised the issue of caring responsibilities and the fact that they chose not to request assistance from the Parliament to allow them to come to the events. In both cases, they were aware of the help available, but appeared to lack confidence to request support.

Recommendation: Clearer information should be provided to prospective participants on assistance with caring responsibilities.

Impact on Parliament

The recommendations produced by the Citizens' Panel were submitted to the Public Participation Inquiry and discussed during the meeting on 14th December 2022. The Committee took evidence from five panellists. The nature and the spirit of the discussions reflected the the tone of the deliberations.

Numerous examples of good practice emerged in the process of this evaluation, particularly political buy-in and engagement of Parliamentary staff. The facilitators praised the proactive role of the core delivery group for creating the sense of an integrated team, with staff, clerks, politicians and the Convenor of the Committee working together to achieve the stated aim.

The outcome of the process was 17 recommendations relating to the question about how to increase participation in the work of Parliament captured in the [interim report](#) published in December 2022. The facilitators were hopeful that these recommendations will be given prominence in the subsequent discussions of the Committee, and will accentuate the benefits of deliberative democracy.

The facilitators demonstrated outstanding commitment to planning the deliberative events, organization, facilitation and making sure that the events ran smoothly. As a management academic with extensive experience of researching organization of work, I could not help noticing the heavy workload placed on the team of facilitators over and above their day-to-day work activities. At no point did this additional workload affect the quality of the organization, which was exemplary, but perhaps measures could be taken to offer relief from other routine tasks in advance of the future deliberative events. A lighter workload in the period of one or two weeks in the run up to the deliberative events, or increasing the size of the team, might help reduce staff stress. More time is needed for team meetings and planning.

Recommendations: Better resourcing of future events should be offered to relieve staff from other routine tasks in advance of the future deliberative events.

Addendum: Impact of the Citizens' Panel on the Committee recommendations

The final report, Embedding Public Participation in the Work of the Parliament, fully reflects the work of the Citizens' Panel and its outcomes.

The report clearly details the process of organizing the Citizens' Panel, the actual deliberations, decision making and the

formulation of the recommendations. The 17 recommendations included in the report reflect the discussions on how the Parliament could engage with the people of Scotland that I witnessed in October and November 2022.

I had ample opportunities to discuss my observations and recommendations included in my report with the Citizens' Panel facilitators as well as the Committee and its support staff, and these recommendations were taken on board and reflected in the Embedding Public Participation in the Work of the Parliament report. In particular, my observations on a robust process for selecting participants who can operate as a microcosm of Scottish society have been considered and addressed. Although selection of participants is not a straightforward task, the report identifies a sound methodology that takes account of the appropriate mixture of men and women, a range of ages, income, employment status, level of education and a reasonable geographical spread, as well as race, disability, marital status and caring responsibilities. Furthermore, my practical recommendations on providing information in advance of the deliberations were addressed by the team.

The final report, Embedding Public Participation in the Work of the Parliament, is a comprehensive document drawing on a wide range of streams of work of the Committee.

Summary of recommendations:

Better use of reserve lists to mitigate against cancellations, especially among the under-represented and harder to reach sections of society.

To address the issue of information overload, the team may consider diversifying the modes of delivery, perhaps introducing more audio-visual material to complement the talks.

Clearer information should be provided to prospective participants on assistance with caring responsibilities.

Better resourcing of future events should be offered to relieve staff from other routine tasks in advance of the future deliberative events.

Appendix

Questions included in the survey administered at the beginning of the first weekend related to two topics: motivation for taking part in the Panel, and the participants' prior experiences of engagement with democratic processes.

The questions were:

Question 1: Please tell us why you decided to take part in this Citizens' Panel?

Question 2: In the last 3 years have you done any of the following to influence decisions, laws, or policies? (*Tick as appropriate*)

Voted in an election

Created or signed a petition

Contacted a local councillor, MP or MSP

Taken part in a public consultation

Donated money or paid a membership fee to a political party

Taken part in a demonstration or march

None of these.

Questions asked of the participants during the two last days of the in-person sessions:

What motivated you to join the Citizens' Panel?

Did you receive clear information on what to expect?

Did you encounter any challenges in attending the in-person and online sessions?

How do you feel about participating in the Panel? Which aspects of the sessions did you find valuable? What improvements could be made?

What were the group dynamics?

What did you think about the way the sessions were run?

Did the facilitators explain everything clearly?

Do you have a sense of ownership of the recommendations produced by the Citizens' Panel?

Questions asked of the facilitators after the in-person sessions:

What were the main lessons learned from organizing the Citizens' Panel?

What went well? What could have been done differently?

What were the most challenging aspects of facilitating the meetings?

Was the size of the team of facilitators adequate?

Was the Citizens' Panel adequately resourced? Was the staff workload appropriate?