



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Thursday 26 May 2022

Session 6



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CONTENTS

	Col.
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	1
FUTURE PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURES AND PRACTICES INQUIRY	2

STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE
13th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)

*Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab)

Liam Fowley (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Artemis Pana (Scottish Rural Action)

Bill Scott (Inclusion Scotland)

Charis Scott (Christians Against Poverty)

Kimberley Somerside (Voluntary Health Scotland)

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con) (Committee Substitute)

Mhairi Wylie (Highland Third Sector Interface)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Katy Orr

LOCATION

The Sir Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)

Scottish Parliament

Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Thursday 26 May 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:07]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Martin Whitfield): Good morning. I apologise for the slight delay to the start of the 13th meeting in 2022 of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. We have received apologies from Edward Mountain MSP. In his place, we are joined by Sue Webber MSP.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on whether to take in private items 5, 6 and 7, as well as future consideration of the code of conduct rule changes, the draft report on future parliamentary procedures and practices and consideration of a revision to the directions to the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland. Do we agree to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: I am grateful. We will postpone items 2 and 3 to a future meeting, at a time to be agreed. That takes us to item 4.

Future Parliamentary Procedures and Practices Inquiry

09:08

The Convener: I welcome to the evidence session Artemis Pana, national co-ordinator, Scottish Rural Action; Bill Scott, senior policy adviser, Inclusion Scotland; Charis Scott, Scotland promotion and engagement manager, Christians Against Poverty; and Mhairi Wylie, chief officer, Highland Third Sector Interface, and member of the TSI Scotland Network, which is a body of charities that supports the third sector across Scotland. Those witnesses join us online.

In the room, we have Liam Fowley, former MSYP for Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley and former vice-chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament; and Kimberley Somerside, policy and engagement officer, Voluntary Health Scotland.

I remind those who are joining us online to type R in the chat function on the BlueJeans platform if they would like to come in on any issues. I am hoping that the session can be in the form of a round table, with conversation and discussion through me as convener, and your input will help with the report that we are preparing.

I will kick off with Artemis Pana and work through those witnesses who are joining us online before inviting contributions from those who are in the room. To what extent do you normally engage with the Parliament, and how has that been different since Covid?

That is an enormous question about what we have been through in the past 18 months or so and how that has affected your interactions with the Parliament. Your answer might cover frequency of engagement on issues, whom you have engaged with—committees or others—and the ways in which that engagement has happened.

Artemis Pana (Scottish Rural Action): Good morning, everybody. Thank you very much for the opportunity to participate, convener. My organisation acts as a platform to connect our members to decision makers in Government at all levels—local, Scottish, United Kingdom and European. Our members include individuals, many of whom have lived expertise of intersectional issues, and organisations such as development trusts, businesses and second-tier bodies that all have an interest in rural and island affairs.

As I said, we are a platform between our members and those who are in power. Our members normally engage a lot with the Scottish Parliament through all available mechanisms, which include petitions, briefings to MSPs,

committee appearances, cross-party groups and activities that are facilitated through the Parliament's in-house participation and communities team.

Since Covid, we, as an organisation, have looked at three aspects of parliamentary proceedings that we feel are important to examine. The first aspect is the number and types of participation entry points—as the Parliament's website says, that is about how people get involved in Parliament. We found that most participation entry points have remained about the same, so participation levels for petitions, electronic briefings to MSPs and committee proceedings—I apologise for looking away from the camera, as I am checking my notes—as well as online consultations and cross-party groups have remained similar. We found that mini-publics fell off the Parliament's radar, and we strongly urge the committee to examine in the context of its inquiry their potential positive impact.

On a positive note, we found that entry points through participation opportunities that are facilitated by the Parliament's participation and communities team have increased. That includes virtual site visits, briefings for committee members and focus group consultations. Such opportunities are invaluable and should be built on.

That was the first aspect, which relates to ways in which people get involved in Parliament. The second aspect is accessibility. Have the entry points become more or less accessible because of Covid? From a rural and island geography perspective, most entry points became more accessible because of the move to online proceedings. That is interesting because, although hybrid approaches were used in committee and cross-party group meetings before Covid, the normalisation of online proceedings has really helped. Before, people thought that it was socially unacceptable not to turn up in person to Parliament, so they made a choice accordingly.

Normalising online proceedings has made online participation a lot easier and has probably hastened technological advances that have made such experiences a lot better, as with today's meeting. The process still generates a lot of barriers. There are barriers for our members who do not have good broadband access, information technology skills or technology in their home, as well as for those who live with caring responsibilities or with a disability. We need to talk about the level of support and flexibility for our members and the public.

I will quickly cover the third aspect, which it is crucial for us to flag—

The Convener: I apologise for speaking across you, Artemis, but the committee intends to look

into the aspects that you are describing later in this round-table discussion. The first question was just to capture your experience over the past 18 months or so.

I had in my mind a question about something that you said, but it has completely slipped out. There we are—I give my deepest apologies. If it is all right, I might well return to you when that question comes back into my addled brain.

Artemis Pana: Absolutely.

The Convener: I ask Bill Scott to give Inclusion Scotland's view on experiences over the past 18 months.

Bill Scott (Inclusion Scotland): Our view is similar to that of Artemis Pana. In many ways, the move to online activity has assisted disabled people to participate in parliamentary business and, in particular, to give evidence to committees. For disabled people, particularly those in rural areas, the journey to Parliament can be so energy sapping that they would not consider it, even if accommodation was provided. If their social care needs are really high, coming to Parliament is quite a difficult and strenuous experience. Therefore, the move online has opened up participation to a whole range of disabled people who otherwise would not be able to take part.

09:15

It is good that there is a move back to face-to-face meetings as well, because quite a large group of disabled people are not online. The option of appearing in person is good for them, because they would not otherwise be able to take part.

Normally, I would probably be in the Parliament every other week, but I have not been in the Parliament on business for more than two years. I will be attending a committee session for the first time next week. The experience online has been really good, and the tech has generally worked very well. However, we miss having informal chats with MSPs. You might be in to visit an MSP or to give evidence to a committee and, quite often, you will bump into somebody else in the cafeteria or on your way to or from a meeting. We are missing those opportunities to build up relationships with MSPs and parliamentary staff—that is what has been missing from the online experience.

The Convener: That is very helpful, thank you. Charis, what are your comments on the experiences of the past 18 months?

Charis Scott (Christians Against Poverty): Christians Against Poverty provides debt advice. We have a network of debt centres across Scotland and we work predominantly with people who have a low income. Before the pandemic, we

did not have many opportunities to come to Parliament. We would take part in consultations and work with local MSPs where we had debt centres to raise awareness, and we had referral processes through that.

For us, the pandemic has opened up a lot of opportunities to work with Parliament. There are probably a couple of reasons for that. First, there has been more public awareness of the issues of poverty and debt, which have been on the radar over the past couple of years due to our collective experience. Secondly, there has been an openness to the input of faith groups and a recognition of the work that they are doing across Scotland at this time.

Over the past couple of years, we have had the opportunity to take part and to work with the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, particularly on its low income and debt problems inquiry. We have done that by providing our experience and expertise, and by facilitating experts by experience to take part in those sessions. We have also been involved with the cross-party group on poverty.

On the whole, that openness and having hybrid options have been positive, although, as other witnesses have highlighted, there are still barriers. Opportunities have been opened up for people, regardless of their location or caring responsibilities, to take part in Parliament when they would not have done so previously.

The Convener: Thank you, Charis. That is very interesting. I do not know whether you can answer this question for those who access Parliament, but has it felt more your Parliament over the past 18 months because of that access to a wider group of MSPs than was previously the case?

Charis Scott: It is certainly heading that way. For the people whom we have worked with who have taken part in experts-by-experience sessions, there is definitely a growing feeling of being heard and valued. They feel that they are able to make a difference—they do not want anyone else to experience what they have, so they are motivated to take part and have felt really valued by that experience.

The Convener: Thank you. Mhairi, you have probably come from as far afield as anyone. How has the experience of the interaction over the past 18 months been for you?

Mhairi Wylie (Highland Third Sector Interface): Thank you for including TSIs in the meeting. I will pull significantly from my experience of being based in the Highlands but will bear in mind the wider experience across the TSI network.

In many respects, in relation to the issue that we are discussing, the experience over the past 18 months has been quite positive. The perception

from our more remote and rural colleagues across Scotland is that we have tended to draw on individuals within the central belt to participate in issues connected to the Parliament or in engagement more broadly with MSPs on specific issues. We are finding now that people do not have to try to evaluate the value of attending the Parliament. For example, if I was not attending digitally, I would have had to come down last night, attended in person and then had to travel back. That represents a significant amount of time away from other activities, so you have to make an evaluated choice about it.

I could not agree more with Artemis Pana's point about normalisation. People in the Highlands, in remote and rural communities or in the islands were not unaware that we could join in digitally previous to March 2020, but we had to make an evaluated choice about whether that participation would do the work because we have sat in meetings where it has not. However, what is socially acceptable now is very different to what was acceptable before that date. That has been a really positive change, too. Overall, people from more remote and rural communities are able to participate in a much more normalised way. That means that we are able to engage people who are closer to subject experts rather than trying to channel that expertise through other individuals who are geographically closer.

All in all, the experience has been really positive. We have had some really good engagement with the parliamentary outreach service, but I point out that it is not just about us participating with the Parliament digitally but about the Parliament participating with us digitally. The fact that we can do that digitally means that I do not feel guilty about asking an individual, whether an MSP or a member of parliamentary staff, to participate with us, because I am not asking them to make a six-and-a-half or seven-hour journey and, potentially, an overnight stay. It goes both ways, and it is nice not to feel so guilty asking people to participate for a little while as well.

Overall, the experience has been quite positive, although I acknowledge all the barriers that I have no doubt we are about to go into and that others have already acknowledged.

The Convener: You should never feel guilty about demanding that your MSPs do work—do not worry about that.

Kimberly Somerside, what has your experience been over the past 18 months?

Kimberley Somerside (Voluntary Health Scotland): I will give some background to Voluntary Health Scotland. We are an intermediary organisation and network for health charities and other voluntary organisations that

work in health. The core purpose of our organisation is to tackle health inequalities and improve the health and wellbeing of the population. By nature of that purpose, we engage with the Parliament over a number of portfolios but primarily with the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.

For the past seven years, we have been the secretariat to the cross-party group on health inequalities. The CPG is definitely the body in Parliament with which we engage the most. It has moved entirely online, as I am sure that you are aware. Largely the same number of people attend, but we do not have to cap attendance, which is a big change—in the past, it had to be capped but we do not have to do that any more.

It is worth saying that it is harder to engage people given the numbers we have online. Having 60 attendees online is not the same experience as it was having them in person. However, as other witnesses have said, engagement is far wider now and we manage to reach people whom we did not reach before.

The one thing that has been missed is the CPG's annual reception. That played a really big part in creating networks and communities not only with MSPs but with people who are working to tackle health inequalities. It played a big networking role.

The other big area of engagement for us is with the participation and communities team. I have many great things to say about its members. They really are fabulous. Their role in engaging Parliament with communities and managing to get communities into Parliament cannot be overstated. With that team, we link up our member organisations and other stakeholders with the Parliament, but the team also provides learning for our members and our health policy officers network on how to engage with the Parliament. Beyond that, we mainly engage with committee clerks and committees.

The Convener: That is very helpful.

Liam Fowley, what is your experience?

Liam Fowley (Scottish Youth Parliament): Good morning and thank you for the invitation today. In answer to the first part of your original question, as the democratically elected voice of Scotland's young people, the SYP has a natural link with the Scottish Parliament, which is the democratically elected voice of the people. That link has been really strong over the past 20-odd years and, over Covid, it has actually improved. The common theme is that the participation and communities team is absolutely superb. It plays a vital role in the Parliament. The team members are very effective at taking feedback, which is really important, on what is not going right and where we

can improve things. They have actioned that feedback and have shown quite a lot of good examples of youth participation. Our experience throughout is that they have come back to say what they have done to change things.

We have a partnership agreement with the Scottish Parliament, and we are grateful to the Presiding Officer for signing that. Again, that has improved the relationship between the SYP and the Scottish Parliament. During Covid, when we were all online, that was clearly shown by the additional effort that was made to get times that suited young people. That is the really important part. I know that we will come on to this later, but the biggest issue for us is to do with the timings of Parliament and how it operates during working hours, when young people will probably—or should—be at school, college or work. That is a massive barrier.

We are moving towards the legally binding incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and we are getting there slowly, which is fantastic to hear.

The convener asked earlier whether it is more our Parliament now. We are certainly getting there; young people are getting to the point at which they feel that it is a Parliament that represents them. There is a lot more work to do, so I am glad that this inquiry is happening.

The Convener: Thank you all for your contributions. I will now invite various members of the committee to ask questions. As all conveners say—across the whole world, I have now discovered—not everyone needs to answer the questions but, if you have something that you would like to contribute, please type R in the chat function or indicate to me.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): After I ask my question, I will invite each person to say something if they would like to do so.

In your view, what are the positives about the changes that the Parliament has made to its working practices? That question goes first to Artemis Pana. You talked about normalising the online experience, but mentioned the negative aspect of a lack of good broadband access for some people. Can you think about a few of the positives from those working practices?

Artemis Pana: As Mhairi Wylie and other witnesses mentioned, an enormous positive is a cultural step change towards recognition of civil society organisations as partners to Parliament in facilitating public engagement, rather than as a replacement for public engagement. As civil society organisations, our job is not to speak on behalf of the people with the real lived expertise but to give them a platform. The Scottish Parliament participation and communities team

understands that you need to take that extra step and make that extra effort to ensure meaningful participation by working with civil society organisations. That change over the past two years has been remarkable, and it has been facilitated by a move to online models of delivery.

Tess White: Bill, would you like to go next?

Bill Scott: Our experience is similar. Disabled people have been participating in the Parliament's activities possibly more than they did before the pandemic, which is surprising, given the vulnerability of so many disabled people to Covid. Because they were vulnerable in the first year, in many situations, they had to isolate, so they were trapped at home, but they were able to take part in the Parliament's proceedings.

I add our voice to those of the other organisations who have said that the participation team in the Parliament has been excellent. It has done a really good job of supporting people who have taken part in evidence sessions with committees.

That really needs to continue, because that sort of before-and-after support is important to people. They want to feel that, by giving evidence, they have made a difference. The work of committees is important in influencing what Government does and does not do. If people can see that a committee has listened to them, has taken their views on board, has included those views in its report and refers to them in its questions to ministers when they give evidence, it is valuable, because it demonstrates to people that they have a genuine voice.

09:30

As the other organisations have made clear, the real experts are those with lived experience. We have been trying to get that message across for years now, and I think that the Parliament has taken it on and really values the voices of those at the sharp end of policies and Government action or, indeed, inaction. The experience has been very positive in those terms, and long may it continue. I hope that the Parliament continues to involve people as it has during the pandemic.

Tess White: So, you think that the experience has been really positive and you have highlighted the option to appear in person or in hybrid form.

Charis, do you want to go next?

Charis Scott: There are a couple of positive experiences that we would highlight. As Bill Scott said, we have seen a real shift towards an openness to hearing from those with lived experience and expertise in particular areas, and we would highlight the Social Justice and Social Security Committee's recent inquiry into low

income and debt problems as good practice in that respect. We have worked closely with Inclusion Scotland to ensure that those experts have had a positive experience, and I would also highlight as a positive example the flexibility offered by video platforms such as Zoom in making things more accessible to people.

We would also highlight as a positive step forward the fact that those experts are now being paid for their experience. Our clients who have taken part have been paid for their time in recognition of their expertise, and we would love it if that positive development were to continue—indeed, that is something that we would advocate. We need that kind of flexibility.

That said, we also need to find ways of overcoming the barriers to digital exclusion. There is definitely more that we can do in that respect, but we are seeing positive steps in the right direction. For example, people have been working with us to ensure that our clients have access to digital equipment, broadband and so on, so that they can take part in evidence-taking sessions.

Tess White: Mhairi, do you have any comments?

Mhairi Wylie: I just want to make a couple of points, because I am quite conscious of the time.

Much of our experience has been very positive. I feel that the Parliament is more accessible, not just because of my experiences but from the feedback that we are getting, but I think that it is more important than that. The impression that I am getting from the people who are now participating in parliamentary inquiries and sessions such as this one is that the input is now much broader, and you are not necessarily seeing as many of the well-kent faces. The channels through which information is flowing into the Parliament from the groups that Artemis Pana described as civil society are now much broader and probably more accessible and certainly bring in a wider spectrum of views. All of that is positive, and it probably results in a more inclusive approach.

That said, I would also echo Bill Scott's point about the lack of ability to build up relationships. I suspect that, when all of you came into the room this morning, you spoke to each other and had those exchanges—at least, I hope that you did—and we do not get such an opportunity when we participate digitally.

Tess White: My next question is actually going to be on the negatives, but we have already captured that point about the conversations that go on before and after meetings.

Kimberley, can you highlight some of the positives?

Kimberley Somerside: Yes. I largely agree with everything that has been said. I will not labour the points about how much online engagement increases the third sector's involvement in Parliament, but it is far less resource intensive to engage in that way, which is good because resources are stretched. Participating takes an hour out of your day as opposed to the entire day, and we find that our members enjoy having the ability to give evidence online.

Our organisation holds a lot of events in collaboration with the Parliament's participation and communities team. As a real-life example, we were able to participate in the health inequalities inquiry that has just kicked off by organising four online events over the course of two days. All of the events were online, and all of them had multiple breakout rooms—Sue Webber attended them. Our organisation's breakout room primarily involved other organisations that work in the health sector, and the other organisations that we collaborated with brought experts with lived experience into the room.

That was a vast project that took place on a Friday and a Monday, and I do not think that we would have reached as many people had it all been done in person, so that is a good example. Because of the scale and the breakout sessions, the online approach worked well. We did not have the barriers that we sometimes face when CPGs are held in vast rooms and not everyone can contribute. The approach increased our capacity to contribute.

For us, the main positives are the wider engagement and the points about capacity and resources.

Tess White: Thank you. Mhairi Wylie almost said that digital equals participation, subject to people having access to broadband and so on.

Liam Fowley: I will not labour any points, as I know that every convener in the world is a demon on the clock.

The issue of disruption to young people's lives has been touched on, but it is important to solidify that idea. A real-world example of that is that I am currently interrupting my education to give evidence—so there we go.

The Scottish Youth Parliament puts forward young people with experience of whatever the inquiry or session that is taking place covers, because it is important that the Parliament hears from young people directly. However, that requires disruption from school, work or college, and travel time is involved—the rural aspect of that has been mentioned. The time involved has almost been halved by digital participation. We have had someone giving evidence from the back of their

school classroom and, although that caused a slight disruption, it is a significant improvement.

That links to our thanks. During the Covid pandemic, there have been more sessions that are directly for young people, and those are important. Only young people and a couple of committee members are on the Teams calls for those sessions. Provided that all young people have digital access, that is a significant improvement on previous experience when people had to come into a committee room like this one, which—no offence—is a wee bit intimidating for some young people. That is not a personal dig, but the lights, camera, big table and things like that are significant. If someone pops on to an online call, they just go on, have a chat and go away again, which is a totally different experience to being in the room. Online participation also comes with support, because if the person on the Teams call panics, they can send a text to someone who can support them. That is key, because people might freeze in this environment.

The “your views” platform that the Scottish Parliament now has on its website is brilliant, because young people can quickly pop on a view—it is as simple as that. It brings young people and their Parliament closer and means that they do not have to come in to big sessions like this one or write long screeds of information; instead, they can pop a couple of sentences on a platform, which is fantastic.

There have been quite a lot of good experiences.

Tess White: Thanks, Liam. We will now go backwards—

The Convener: To pick up on Liam's very astute point about time, if it is all right with you, Tess, I will ask Bob Doris to introduce his question, which relates to yours and might allow us to identify some solutions.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Good morning, everyone. To give some brief context to my question, there is consensus that, during Covid, great opportunities have been taken to improve equality, but every measure that is taken can inadvertently create some form of inequality. We have heard that remote participation is great unless a person's device or broadband connection is not as good as someone else's. Have there been any equalities issues that specifically relate to the change to online? Things can get better, but inequalities between different groups can still increase.

Do you want me to roll my second question together with this one, convener?

The Convener: Yes.

Bob Doris: Rather than just putting on record what those inequalities might be, do the witnesses have any thoughts about how to address them? On broadband, for example, could the Parliament book a specific suite where there is good internet connectivity close to where the person lives, to ensure that there are no issues with connectivity or house space?

I have one final question, in case I do not come back in on this topic. As Artemis Pana and Bill Scott both mentioned, if someone has caring responsibilities or lives in a remote or rural area, it is great that they can contribute from home, but that should not cut them off from being able to come to Parliament. Might there be some inequalities in that regard? If we say to people, "Well, it's difficult to get you to Parliament, so just go remote," an inequality emerges. How can we address that sort of stuff?

I name-checked Artemis and Bill, so I should give them the opportunity to come in. Perhaps Bill can go first.

Bill Scott: You are right. I touched on one of the inequalities that continues to exist, which is that a fair proportion of disabled people—about 30 per cent, or one in three—are not connected to the internet at home at all. To a large extent, therefore, they have been excluded from participation during the pandemic. We want a hybrid model in the future, so that there is at least the option for those people who do not have an internet connection to come into Parliament if that is what they want to do.

In addition, as you suggest, there could be suites available locally. Third sector partners such as TSIs could provide space so that people could come in and get a connection to enable them to give evidence to Parliament not far from home. That would be a good option, although, in that situation, someone who has no internet connection at home might be unfamiliar with using a computer, so they might need some support in doing so, or they might have a physical or sensory impairment that makes it difficult. Those types of issues need to be taken into account.

There will still be a proportion of disabled people and those with long-term health issues who will only be able to participate remotely. That is another reason why the hybrid forums should continue. I have ex-colleagues who are still isolating at home because, if they contracted Covid, given their compromised immune system, it would still be life-threatening. A hybrid model is definitely needed as we move forward, and we need to continue to take into account the inequalities issues that arise for disabled people in particular, but also for many older people, who may find using the internet difficult.

To go back to the point about building relations, the opportunity to meet somebody in person, such as an MSP who represents your area, or represents you on an issue in which you are particularly interested, should still exist. The Parliament has always been much more open than Westminster, with which I am also familiar in my work, and it has built on that during the pandemic. I hope that that openness continues.

I take on board Liam Fowley's point that committee rooms can be intimidating for people the first time that they see them. Nevertheless, I often find that, when people come into the Parliament with me and other policy team members from Inclusion Scotland, they find the place very welcoming and open. Again, I look forward to being able to continue to bring people to the Parliament so that they can see the place where the decisions that affect their lives are made. The Parliament has been good about being open in the past, and the online model provides more access than there was previously, so it is a positive development.

The Convener: Thank you, Bill. I know that Mhairi Wylie wants to come in, but first I will bring in Artemis Pana, given that she was mentioned in the question.

09:45

Artemis Pana: I agree with everything that Bill Scott has said. We need to offer people choice and financial resources if they want to come to Parliament in person. We certainly should not create a tiered approach, because that would be a disaster.

I want to make two other small comments. First, the Parliament's move towards regarding civil society organisations as partners in public participation is critical, given our role in facilitating individual participation. We can work with our members to provide that flexible support and ensure that they have access to things.

The last thing that I want to say very quickly is that very small changes can sometimes make enormous differences. Some of our members have asked whether they can provide very short video recordings as evidence; some would much rather interact with you through the chat function on this platform; and some would probably benefit from the ability to phone in their evidence. Sometimes a phone-in system can create the most equality of participation on the day.

The Convener: Is it your view, then, that the Parliament itself should be at its most versatile with regard to what we are calling hybrid interaction instead of placing any expectation in that respect on those from whom we are seeking contributions? Is that an ideal solution?

Artemis Pana: It is a bit of both. As I have said, there is a role for organisations such as ours, whose members have individual voices, views and experiences, in brokering that mutual understanding.

Does that answer your question?

The Convener: Thank you for that.

Mhairi Wylie: I just want to make a few points. I might be leading into another question, but I think that you are particularly interested in hearing about what can be done or what can be built on. The issue of inequalities has already been touched on, so I will not labour the points that have been made, although I will say that I agree with all of them.

That said, we cannot lose sight of the fact that there have been some phenomenal and very positive changes in the past 18 months, and there are some inspiring stories, particularly from our older people and some of our communities with certain disabilities in Highland. Despite that great engagement, however, the problem from an inequalities perspective is that some of the interventions that support individuals have not been sustainable. A number of good digital engagement programmes were brought in early on, but the positivity associated with all of that was not sustainable, because no one at the time thought about the longevity of what was being put in place. In putting in interventions to support better equality engagement, particularly digital engagement, we also need to think about how we sustain those things over time. Giving someone a fully paid-up dongle so that they have internet access for 18 months might be great, but what do they do at the end of the time if they have become dependent on being online but cannot afford to pay up the dongle themselves?

I like Bill Scott's idea of the hubs, which the third sector could explore as a structure for supporting better engagement with the Parliament. Although the digital option means that those in remote and rural communities do not have to travel to Parliament, it might not be viable for them to participate in this kind of engagement in their own home, and we could explore the creation of localised hub points where they could get digital support, especially if they are unfamiliar with that sort of thing.

Although I cannot support the hybrid concept more, I think that the Parliament should lead by example in that respect or be more explicit in its guidance about how we bring in a functioning hybrid model. It could, for example, define those occasions when engagement through digital sessions and meetings would be an option, those for which the in-person option is better and how those things can be blended. I have to say,

though, that I do not envy your task in finding an answer to that.

Charis Scott: Digital exclusion is a real issue for those on low incomes. Indeed, with the rising cost of living, the first thing to go for people is broadband, which is seen as non-essential or something that they can be more flexible about. We need to bear that in mind when we consider the hybrid model.

We have had a couple of examples of difficulties and of good practice. One client, who took part in the evidence session in November, did not have access to the right equipment or to broadband, so they travelled to the house of their debt coach and did the session from there. That was a positive experience, but it is about recognising the additional barriers that that creates for that individual.

Another individual who was taking part had been given an iPad through the connecting Scotland programme. That enabled them to take a greater part in a variety of things that were happening and on a more regular basis, because they had that access, as well as access to skills development and training.

The final thing that I will highlight is that, as part of those processes, our experts by experience were given the opportunity to claim expenses for broadband or data usage, but in practice that is a complicated process to go through. Therefore, it is very important to do whatever we can to simplify that for people.

Liam Fowley: I will pick up on a couple of comments that were made. With regard to the point about whether the onus is on Parliament to reach out, as Artemis Pana said, there is a two-way street. However, it is key that Parliament does not say that it is on us and therefore does not engage with those that it is trying to reach out to. Naturally, needs change as well.

As you would expect, digital access was discussed quite heavily. It is also about the run-up to the meeting. Papers are sent out by email and they might say "click on this link for more information". Those things also need to be considered; it is not just about the meeting but about the run-up to it.

We regularly pick up two key elements with young people on the digital front, and the first is the privacy element. Not every young person has somewhere private in their home where they can go and sit to give evidence.

The second element is body image concerns. A lot of young people struggle online, because they can constantly see their faces and themselves. That does not happen when people attend meetings in person. That is a serious

consideration that makes young people not want to engage online. Because of time, I will leave it there.

Kimberley Somerside: To echo what Liam Fowley said about the privacy issue, that is also an issue for people who are perhaps bringing to Parliament experiences that are very raw and challenging. More informal engagement would be beneficial to some of those organisations. For example, engagement sessions took place as part of the health inequalities inquiry. It is important to have that private space to interact with MSPs and give that lived experience because, as has been said, it can be quite intimidating for people either to see themselves on camera or to be in this committee room. Therefore, it is important to have more informal engagement.

The other thing, which Bill Scott already mentioned, was engaging with third sector organisations and giving them the resources to bring people to Parliament. Again, the participation and communities team plays an important role in that. Enabling people to engage through that community angle is important.

As has been mentioned, Parliament has an important role in reaching out. Members will know better than I do whether they have come back, but committee visits to the community as part of inquiries have been greatly missed. Those visits bring people to Parliament who might not have thought to engage in an inquiry. Not everyone is checking the Parliament website to see what the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee is looking into. Therefore, it would be great to see those visits return in some capacity.

The Convener: I will pass questioning over to Collette Stevenson, who is a great advocate of committee visits.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Good morning. It is lovely to meet you all online and in person. I will touch on accessibility and what we have done about that so far. Would you like to see any of those changes continue? How can we enhance or tweak what we do? Some of you have touched on it. Today, there are six witnesses at the meeting; four of you are online and two are in the committee room. Do you think that that is the right balance? To contextualise that, is there anything else that we can do to enhance your journey to interact with us here, in Parliament?

Liam Fowley: As has been discussed, it has been a very positive experience over the past 18 months. Our main call is to let us keep hybrid proceedings.

If there are areas where that can be enhanced, lead-in time would be a big one. Requests to attend committees and papers coming through are

significant issues for the SYP. As an organisation, we never want to come to Parliament and say, "This is my opinion." We want to say, "This is the opinion of Scotland's young people," and we cannot do that if we have notice of a day or two of what the questions will be and what the papers are. If we have more than a week's notice, we can give you the best data that we can possibly get from children and young people across Scotland. Naturally, I assume that that is what the Parliament would want.

There is a key element that you discussed, although it is not happening today—which is lovely—and that is tokenism. That is a big concern. The young people who we provide to speak to committees are volunteers. I am not sure of the status of my witness colleagues around the room today, but a lot of the time our volunteers go into meetings with people who are paid and in full-time positions. We need to consider the value that we place on volunteers' time. I know that we have discussed this, but is there a possibility of purely volunteer sessions with two or three witnesses? Then committees would get the data that they require for their research for an inquiry as quickly as possible and can move on to other witnesses. I am not devaluing the time of other witnesses or the fact that they are paid, but would it not have been more efficient for the six colleagues who are giving evidence in this meeting if there had been two sessions of three witnesses that lasted half the time? Maybe you could think about something along those lines with regard to the time element. I will leave it there, as I am sure that others have great contributions to make.

Charis Scott: We would really value continued learning. Particularly where there is a lived experience session, there should be an opportunity for people to provide input on it afterwards, so that there can be growth and learning and a commitment to continual improvement around that. That is a key part of it.

Something that we found valuable in the inquiry that we are taking part in is having a hybrid approach to how we do that. We have had online sessions with the people taking part, so that we are gathered together to get to know each other before coming into that experience; they are currently due to come into Parliament on 6 June to meet a committee. Therefore, they have had a lot of preparation and investment during that time beforehand. What would be important after that is to gather their feedback and their experience and then commit to continual review and learning as part of the process.

Bill Scott: I echo everything that Charis Scott has just said. I have also given quite a bit of thought to what Liam Fowley said. This is my job, and it is a job that I love. It does not cost me

anything to attend a committee session or to come in to see an MSP or a minister.

We never have any problem in getting disabled people to come forward and give evidence, but I am very aware that that is partially because over half of disabled people of working age are not in work, and therefore they have time to give. I think that that time should still be valued, and rewarded if at all possible, and we are very much in favour of paying people for the time that they give. However, it is obvious that, for lots of sections of the population, attending a committee session or a cross-party group takes time out of their working day, and that means that it costs them to come in to Parliament and give evidence.

More thought should be given to how we can involve people so that committees hear the full breadth of experience. We have been talking about the importance of lived experience, but there are people in low-paid jobs and jobs where they have been harassed or discriminated against who find it difficult to give evidence, both financially and, in some instances, because it would endanger their jobs.

I have had the opportunity in the past to give evidence in private to committee sessions about bullying of young disabled people in school. A couple of young people wanted to give evidence about the ways in which they were humiliated at school, but they would not have been comfortable at all giving that evidence in public.

There are things that could still be done to tweak things and ensure that Parliament is genuinely open and accessible to everyone and that members hear the full breadth of experiences that they need to hear in conducting committee inquiries.

10:00

Collette Stevenson: I am conscious of the time. However, if any of the other witnesses want to come in, I do not want to exclude them.

Artemis Pana: To build on what everybody else has said, a word of caution is that we need to be mindful that the more informal, flexible and relaxed the session, the more accessible it probably will be for a wider range of people but, conversely, we frequently find that we as decision makers, policy makers and society give less value to the information that comes out of informal, flexible and relaxed sessions compared with the information from formal, heavy and minuted committees. It is about paying attention to any trade-off between access and the power of people who participate.

I like Mhairi Wylie's suggestion about hybrid or participation standards of the Parliament that are quite transparent. I am sorry if I have just put

words into her mouth, but that is how I understood her statement.

The Convener: I know that a lot has been covered, but is there anything that Sue Webber wants to ask about?

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con) (Committee Substitute): A lot has been covered. I thank Kimberley Somerside for recognising how the four sessions on Friday and Monday went. To address Artemis Pana's concerns about a trade-off, the information that we gain from the informal sessions will very much shape our formal inquiry.

It is about getting richer evidence and involving many more people—I think that Mhairi Wylie said that it is not just about the well-kent faces—and if this inquiry facilitates that, we need to grasp it. How can we capitalise on that and make the approach even better? Are there any other changes that could make it even easier to engage? I ask Liam Fowley that question, if that is okay, because I am looking at him.

Liam Fowley: That is fine.

We have discussed quite a lot, and I know that colleagues will want to come in with more suggestions. There is a lot of discussion about informal sessions, which are really rich for young people.

There is an example that improved things—it is a good example of feedback, as well. Last session, the Education and Skills Committee wanted feedback on education work during the Covid pandemic. There was going to be a session much like this one on the online platform that was used, but young people said that they did not know how to use it. As a result of that concern, there was a change to Microsoft Teams instead. Young people knew what Microsoft Teams was, because they had to go through a year of using it in school. They and the Parliament therefore adapted very quickly. Such change and feedback are important. If someone whom you want to hear from says that they cannot give evidence on a certain date or that they have a test on that day and they cannot come out of school—I am sure that other examples can be given—the question is how Parliament can adapt to that to get the information.

What will work for one young person will not work for another young person. I have been battling such concerns about for a couple of years now, so I am getting used to how to fit things in, but for some young people there is a barrier. They come into Parliament, where there are people in suits and bright lights, and they think, "Jeezo. What am I doing here?" We do not want that. We want people to say, "This is cool. I get to make a bit of a change here."

The key element that comes into play is that, when a young person is giving their time to share their opinions in evidence, the Parliament and decision makers should say what they have done with their information and why it is valued.

Mhairi Wylie: I have a couple of points in response. To some extent, we have to think about the idea of building relationships. I do not think that it would be off the mark to say that when people are further away from Holyrood, it is a lesser part of their working culture day to day, and of their culture in general. People think that what goes on is something that happens “down there”; it is not necessarily something that belongs to them and their community. I hope that I am not misrepresenting things, but I think that that is the situation.

Informal engagement sessions bring about a consciousness of what is actually going on at Holyrood and how it works: how the Parliament functions, who the people are and what a committee, or an inquiry, actually is. Such sessions bring a lot of those aspects much more to the forefront.

An awful lot of people think, without it necessarily being part of their conscious mindset, “Why would I get involved in Parliament? How is it relevant to me?” To some extent, that is how we end up, particularly in remote and rural areas, with the same well-kent faces—the individuals who engage in active participation. Informal sessions, visiting communities and getting out and about make a phenomenal difference in respect of preparing the cultural landscape for participation in what is going on.

We should bear in mind, however, that we can still use digital for engagement. I am not sure how well that always plays out, but, if a remote and rural community does not get a visit from a committee during an investigation or inquiry because members are unable to make the physical journey there, as it is not economically viable or possible because of calendars, using a digital alternative is still better than doing nothing at all. I would therefore encourage the committee to think about ensuring that we use those alternatives as a way to engage, even if it is for reasons of geography.

Sue Webber: That is great. Does anybody else want to come in?

Kimberley Somerside: I will be brief. With regard to what the Parliament could do, it would be great if, in the future, the Parliament could take a lead in this area by being flexible, creative and ambitious.

A lot of organisations are going through the exact same challenges that the Parliament is going through, and they will be looking to the

Parliament for a lead, so it would be great to see some more in-person events coming back. We know that people have really benefited from that approach in the past. Prior to Covid, Scott Granger, who has since sadly passed away, was a member of the cross-party group on health inequalities. We know from his experience that it made a real difference for him to come to Parliament: having that gravitas, being in the building and engaging with MSPs and ministers directly. It would be a real shame to lose that, but we need to balance it with an online approach as well. I would urge the Parliament to have more ambition, if possible.

The Convener: I will push you slightly on that point. We have discussed the committees, CPGs and other areas of interaction. A comment that we have heard on a number of occasions, from different sources, is that the hybrid method that we use reduces the gravitas—to pick up on the word that you used—and importance of the Parliament. Would you agree with that? Should we be cognisant of, and guard against, that issue? Are we moving into a time when those outside the Parliament who engage with it are fully aware of the importance of the Parliament and, at times, perhaps need the Parliament to be aware of its own importance?

Kimberley Somerside: Yes. To add to what Liam Fowley said, it is entirely within the power of MSPs to bring that gravitas online. It is great to hear that those off-camera informal evidence sessions, which were all held online, will shape the direction of the committee’s inquiry. That is a huge deal, and it brings gravitas to that engagement.

It is not just about the building. The building plays a big role, but MSPs’ role in feeding back on what they have heard is where the gravitas comes from.

The Convener: Thank you. That is helpful.

Mhairi Wylie: That is really interesting. I have not heard that point before, but I am not surprised that it has been raised. I see that as a potential sign that we, and the Parliament, are doing things right. We are changing the model and the shape of things, and the change from something that they are used to is making people feel a bit uncomfortable.

However, I do not agree that the hybrid model reduces gravitas. It actually demonstrates that we have a much more accessible Parliament that is operating, and trying to engage with people, in new and different ways. To some extent, it is innovation that may be making people feel a bit uncomfortable, so I would not agree with that point.

The Convener: Bill, did you have a comment?

Bill Scott: It is just a thought. Like other disabled people's organisations, we have been considering what might happen going forward. If the Parliament is going out to, say, the Highlands, Dumfries and Galloway, the Borders or Argyll and Bute, it can still be difficult for people to participate even if the meeting is in one of the centres. For example, if the committee is in Inverness, that is still 3.5 hours away from Skye.

There are advantages to using hybrid methods, even on committee visits, because that enables participation by people who would not otherwise be able to participate, because of distance, disability or other reasons, such as time. Thinking about hybrid formats, not just for formal committee sessions in Parliament, but for those committee visits that I hope we will see being reinstated, would be a good tweak in order to continue to involve as many people as possible, from as wide a group as possible, in various communities.

Charis Scott: I want to pick up on something that Liam Fowley said about barriers and the move to Microsoft Teams. There is a wider issue about identifying those barriers before people come in, so that it does not prevent them from doing so, and having flexibility. It is not necessarily about Parliament having all the flexibility; it is about working together to work out how to make Parliament accessible.

We work with people on low incomes or who are in debt, which is very stigmatising, so we need to think about how we can make it safe for people to give evidence and take part, perhaps by ensuring that they can remain anonymous. A high number of our clients come from situations—domestic abuse situations, for example—that mean that they would not want to be public in what they are sharing. Having that flexibility to be anonymous but still able to take part is one thing that could be done.

For someone on a low income, the expenses system can be a barrier. It is great that expenses are provided, but people have to make the outlay first and then claim the expense back. Some people might not have the income to do that, so we need to think about how we can remove that barrier.

The Convener: Today, for the first time in my experience as convener, I have the opportunity to say that we have the slightest amount of time left. If there is anything that any of those who are giving evidence—not committee members—would like to put on the record, we can pursue that in correspondence afterwards. I will go round the witnesses to see whether there is anything that they would have liked to discuss but were not able to raise.

Artemis Pana: I think that the session has been very comprehensive. However, I will add my voice to that of Charis Scott to say that we would also welcome participant fees.

Bill Scott: I have nothing to add. My fellow participants have been very good at highlighting the other issues.

Mhairi Wylie: Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the committee. I have nothing to add.

Charis Scott: I think that we have covered everything.

Kimberley Somerside: I have a couple of small points. I hope that the committee will hear from the participation and communities team as part of its inquiry. There are other inquiries in Parliament on participation and I hope that they will all link up.

On witness diversity, there is a form that goes out to witnesses to gather information on diversity, and we would like education and caring responsibilities to be added to that form. I do not know whether that would be possible, but it would be really good to add them. This is such an interesting time to gauge who is engaging with the Parliament and how that can be improved. Those two things—education and caring responsibilities—are key to that.

We welcome the fact that so many more organisations and people can engage with Parliament, primarily because of the work of the participation and communities team. We are really grateful for that.

Liam Fowley: We have discussed engagement a lot and its importance cannot be overstated. My last call would be, if you are ever in doubt about how to engage with a young person, you should just ask them. It is as simple as that. No doubt, they will happily tell you about what they think. The most dangerous statement that could be uttered in the Parliament is, "We've always done it this way." Try to engage and find a way that works for everyone. Thank you very much for inviting young people to the table.

The Convener: Thank you for that. The phrase "just ask them" should apply not just to young people but to everyone.

Thank you all for attending—both those who are using the hybrid format and those who are attending in person. I have found it a very positive meeting. I am glad that the technology stood up—people of my generation always have the fear that it will fall over. If there is anything that subsequently comes to your mind, please feel free to write to us. Our inquiry is on-going but we are moving to the stage where we will be considering our conclusions.

10:15

Meeting continued in private until 11:21.

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