Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 14 December 2022

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 14 December 2022

CONTENTS

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE
18th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Paul MacDonald
Ronnie Paterson
Gillian Ruane
Maria Schwarz
John Sultman

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Lynn Tullis

LOCATION

The Adam Smith Room (CR5)

Scottish Parliament

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 14 December 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Jackson Carlaw): Good morning, and welcome to this special meeting of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee in 2022. I say "special", because I am especially pleased to welcome members of the citizens panel on participation, who will discuss with us their report and the recommendations that arose from it.

We have received apologies from our colleague Fergus Ewing, who is not able to be with us today, as well as from—sadly, at the last minute—Alexander Stewart, who was supposed to be joining us remotely from deepest, darkest Bridge of Allan, where I thought communications still reached. However, he has had communications issues and is unable to join us this morning.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on taking business in private. Are the committee members who are present—David Torrance and Paul Sweeney—content to take item 3 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Public Participation Inquiry

10:31

The Convener: The substance of today's meeting is the committee's public participation inquiry. We have with us around the table some of the 19 members who were able to join in that work. Paul MacDonald, Gillian Ruane, John Sultman, and Maria Schwarz have joined us in the room—and I now see Ronnie Paterson, who is joining us remotely. Mr Paterson, I take it that that is a mirror on the wall behind you and not a porthole. I assume that you are joining us from home and that you are not on board a ship somewhere.

Ronnie Paterson: Most definitely. I am not on board a ship.

The Convener: Welcome, everyone. This is our first opportunity to talk to you. I was very pleased to join the group when all its members looked rather nervously at one another over their first something to eat at the start of their work. However, I know that the work has been a tremendous experience in which everybody has really found their feet and that they have enjoyed it enormously.

Before we go into a discussion of all of that work, we will go around the table and allow everyone to introduce themselves.

I am Jackson Carlaw, and I am the convener of the committee.

Gillian Ruane: My name is Gillian Ruane and I am from Dumfries.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I am David Torrance MSP.

Paul MacDonald: I am Paul MacDonald and I am from Glasgow.

Maria Schwarz: I am Maria Schwarz and I am from Edinburgh.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I am Paul Sweeney and I am an MSP from Glasgow.

John Sultman: I am John Sultman and I am from Glasgow.

The Convener: In addition, a series of our officials, who have met you at various stages along the way, are present. They hide anonymously from the public so, led by our clerk, Lynn Tullis, they will be working quietly in the background.

In this parliamentary session, the remit of the Public Petitions Committee was extended, to the consternation of my predecessor, Johann Lamont, who was the convener of that committee in the last

parliamentary session, because public petitions are, essentially, the people's business before Parliament. Almost uniquely in Parliaments across the world, a single individual's signature is all that it takes for a petition to come before this committee, to be considered and, potentially, to be progressed. Some very important pieces of legislation have followed that process, such as the legislation on free care for the elderly, the extension of care for people with early onset dementia, and the way in which the Government has resolved the women's mesh scandal. All those issues have come up through this committee in recent years.

My predecessor, Johann Lamont, was concerned that we would dilute the focus, but I think that we have managed not to do that so far. I think that our looking at the whole question of deliberative democracy has been a natural coupling with this committee's work. Much of that work was initiated as an inquiry following the work of the commission on parliamentary reform in the previous parliamentary session. That commission, which was established by the previous Presiding Officer, Ken Macintosh, very much suggested that, in this parliamentary session—or earlier, although that was not possible because of the pandemic— we should explore ways in which deliberative democracy might be extended.

That is what initiated the committee's inquiry into public participation. We wanted to consider how people's voices are heard, and we wanted to know how people feel that they are affected when the Scottish Parliament is developing new laws and policies. We recognise that the Parliament does not hear from some groups or communities, so the inquiry is also about how we can ensure that everyone's views and opinions are included in our work.

We started with a consultation with people throughout Scotland, and we heard from 460 people and organisations. They told us what improvements they would like to see to allow us to engage more effectively as a Parliament that is now into its third decade.

As part of the work, the citizens panel was established. Out of thousands of people who were contacted, we were able to have 19 people who broadly reflect the demographic make-up of Scotland. They met in Holyrood, then they met online several times, and then they came together again in Holyrood. In those sittings, they heard about democracy and public participation from some of my MSP colleagues, Scottish Parliament officials, third sector organisations, leading academics, and members of the media.

Having gone through all of that endeavour, the panel has come forward with a report, which we are here to discuss this morning. That report makes 17 recommendations on how Holyrood's work might improve and how it might reflect and meet the needs of the full range of communities that we represent. There is a particular focus on communities that have been underrepresented in the Parliament's deliberations. Those communities were identified through discussion, but I think that many of us understood, even if only subconsciously, that they were underrepresented. As a Parliament, we can keep ourselves very busy without noticing that there are voices that are not being heard.

The recommendations that the panel came up with are wide ranging. I have thoroughly enjoyed digesting them and reflecting on how some of them might, in practical terms, affect the work of the Parliament and how, if the Parliament found favour with them, they might move towards implementation. I hope that you will make a ringing clarion call for the Parliament to embrace your recommendations and for this committee to be empowered to take forward the report and present it to our colleagues in Parliament on your behalf. As part of this exercise, it is important that the recommendations lead to additional changes to the way in which we do business at Holyrood.

I understand that, individually, you might lead on different areas in our discussion. My colleagues and I will follow up with questions in as free-flowing a way as we can.

Ronnie Paterson is the only person who is joining us online this morning. If you raise a hand or something, I will see that and know that you want to come in.

The best place to start is on your general experience of being involved in the panel and how you feel about the process that you went through. I will go to Ronnie Paterson first, as he is joining us from his living room. Would you like to tell us about how you felt about the process?

Ronnie Paterson: I absolutely loved the process that we were involved in. I suppose that, when I first came into the group, I would have been put in the demographic of people who are ignorant and arrogant about politics, but I then realised that it was not really about politics.

You spoke about deliberative democracy. The 19 members came together to discuss the issues in an adult, normal way. None of us was well versed in politics or academia, but we came up with the recommendations 100 per cent as a group. It was amazing that all 19 members agreed our recommendations at the end of the day. The fact that we came up with those recommendations together shows the power of deliberative democracy. I thoroughly enjoyed and loved the process.

The Convener: That is excellent.

Maria Schwarz: I agree. The panel was a great opportunity to come together. A lot of people had their own ideas to contribute, which we could expand on to come up with even better plans. We were able to test out ideas. There were some ideas that the group liked, which we put forward to target groups and got immediate feedback on, which was really good.

John Sultman: I found useful the range of information that was presented to us. Some of that information confirmed things that I thought I knew, and other information completely dispelled illusions that I had. Seeing what we saw and watching the group come together and test out ideas on one another and with third parties was really enlightening, and I am proud of what we have done.

Gillian Ruane: I loved the whole experience from start to finish. There was a wide range of representation. Although young people were underrepresented, they had certainly been invited.

I loved it. The expertise from various organisations that was put in front of us was amazing. We all came together and debated the issues respectfully—nobody railroaded over anyone else. Collectively, we have come up with recommendations, which we hope that you guys will implement.

Paul MacDonald: I found it really interesting. I have always been a follower of politics, but I did not even know the difference between Parliament and Government when I started the process—I did not understand the separation in the structure.

I have always wanted to engage with what goes on in the Government, but I have never really known how to do it. I have always felt frustrated about that, so it was interesting to find out that there are systems in place for engagement and that, potentially, improved systems could be put in place. I found that a lot of people on the panel had the same issues—the same frustrations—that I had. I think that that comes out in distrust of Government in general and people posting angry things online. They feel frustrated about the fact that they do not know how to engage. If the inquiry opens that up, it will be a very positive thing.

The Convener: Thank you. That area of engagement is the first one that we will come to, and I know that you and Maria Schwarz will lead on that.

For people who might be following our proceedings this morning, it is important to say that the 19 individuals who came together were not nominated as such—they are not representatives of particular organisations, sectors or third-party bodies. We arrived at the 19 from a very wide, random selection of the public. The whole point was to bring into the inquiry voices that did not come with any particular baggage or association with political activism, the third sector, voluntary organisations or anything like that. It really was the case that we wanted to get fresh input so that a fresh look could be taken.

It is remarkable that, through that process, you have all come together to produce such a striking report. The recommendations fall under a series of different obvious headings, the first of which is community engagement, which is the subject that Paul MacDonald started to talk about. Maria and Paul will lead us on that area of the report. I do not know which of you will take the initiative. Maria, perhaps you can start us off.

Maria Schwarz: That is fine with me. On community engagement, our first recommendation is:

"Remove barriers to participation so that everyone has an equal opportunity to be involved in the work of the Parliament."

Throughout the process, we have discovered that there are many reasons why many different people might struggle to engage with Parliament. They might have a disability or mobility issues that mean that they cannot get to Parliament. They might not be technology literate, as a result of which they have issues working a computer, which means that they cannot access the Parliament website. For other people, the issue is time.

To solve the problem, we need to look at different solutions because there are so many different barriers. One of the barriers is cost. The fifth paragraph under "Community Engagement" says:

"Raise awareness that the Scottish Parliament will provide payment which addresses the cost barriers that people face when coming to the Parliament and taking part in engagement activities, such as travel expenses, lost income from time off work, childcare and additional costs related to accessibility requirements."

Transport, time off work and childcare are all big barriers that we have identified that working adults, for example, struggle with.

Another point under "Community Engagement" is:

"Ensure access for people with English as a second language".

There are a lot of foreigners in Scotland and, if English is not someone's first language, that might present a barrier.

10:45

Also, there are a significant number of people with learning disabilities. Therefore, we suggested that their participation should be supported with technologies or by promoting and increasing the use of easy read in flyers and documentation

about legislation that the Parliament is putting out for the public.

Paul MacDonald: The second recommendation under that theme is:

"Create opportunities for people to use and share their lived experience to engage on issues that they care about."

We can upskill and educate ourselves very quickly to become experts on things if we need to. However, we noted:

"We don't have the bandwidth to feel passionate about everything all the time—but when we do we need to have the channels there to engage."

We also noted:

"When identifying witnesses, ensure an even balance between academic and professional experts, and people with lived experience."

We found that people felt that there were a lot of professional experts or that opinions were coming from the media or from MSPs but that those opinions did not really reflect their actual lived experience of those problems and issues. That is why they felt quite strongly about the use of deliberative democracy.

Maria Schwarz: The third recommendation is:

"Raise awareness of Parliamentary business in plain and transparent language including visual media."

The latest post-pandemic data on literacy levels show that about 33 per cent of people in Scotland struggle with reading, so plain language and visual media are important to include those people. Under that recommendation, we suggested undertaking

"research into the general public's level of trust and knowledge about the everyday work of the Scottish Parliament."

I believe that a lot more research is necessary. There are only 19 of us, so we are a very small sample size. If you base all your future engagement only on our group of 19, there is the possibility that you will be wasting money. Before you spend thousands of pounds on an engagement campaign hoping to increase awareness, you need to make sure that it will help and reach people rather than just be ignored.

Paul MacDonald: Ronnie, do you want to speak about recommendation 4?

Ronnie Paterson: Oh, the idea of having a bus.

One of the points that came up was to maybe have some sort of mobile unit. When we are talking about diverse voices and communities having an influence on the Parliament's work, a lot of people do not have access to everything. One idea was to go around to communities with a mobile unit—maybe using library buses in more remote areas.

The idea is to have some way of promoting the work of the Parliament and for people in the community who do not have good access to get more involved, so they can share opinions and maybe vote on certain little aspects of what is happening in their community. I think that that would be a great way to engage with people on a more personal basis, to promote Parliament.

As a group, we never really understood the chasm of difference between Parliament and Government. When everybody mentions Parliament, they just think, "Oh, that's Government," and we now know that it is not. That would be a good point to get out to people, and what better way to do that than on a personal basis?

Paul MacDonald: Recommendation 5 is:

"Ensure that community engagement by MSPs doesn't exclude people that are outwith community groups, including by using evenings, weekends and online services."

We found that the systems of engagement had become quite rigid, and we identified multiple groups that are outwith those systems. There are people who are not getting involved. They have an opinion but they are not involved in community groups. Not everyone is necessarily actively looking for ways to engage. They have strong opinions, but they do not know where to start. Therefore, it is about opening up different means of communication, including digital engagement through social media and visits to the Parliament, for which there should be help with costs and childcare provision so that people can engage.

Maria Schwarz: For me, that is the most important point. I work full time—I spend a lot of my time at work and I work a lot of overtime. At the weekend, I am tired. I pay the bills and I clean, so I do not have a lot of time left. My biggest barrier is time, so I need things to happen in the evenings or at the weekends, or I need something that I can quickly look up on my phone. I need time to research the difference between Government and Parliament. I need to research how to engage with the system, and I need to find time to engage with it. A lot of things happen Monday to Friday and I cannot take time off work for that.

The last recommendation on community engagement is:

"Create a system such as a webpage where people can register and be notified about opportunities to engage."

The detail of the recommendation says:

"The Parliament should create and advertise means for people to register their details and interests with the Parliament. MSPs and Committees would be able to contact individuals about opportunities to engage in the work of Parliament when an issue arises that individuals are interested in. This idea was inspired by the amount of

issues discussed at parliament at any one time passing the public by—this solution could ensure that no one misses the chance to engage."

For example, when there is a call for views, people need to go to the website regularly to see whether there has been an update. Why cannot people just subscribe to an alert so that they get an email if there is an update? Similarly, people could get an alert if there was a new call for views and then, if they were interested, they could look at the website.

The Convener: Let us go through those points in turn and we will see whether any of my colleagues want to pursue the discussion on them as we do. The first recommendation is on removing the barriers to participation. It also refers to following up previous research by researching different methods of engagement, but we will come to that. First, we will look at removing the barriers to participation and addressing the consequences for those who might try to participate, including lost income and the cost of coming to the Parliament or of any other arrangements that people might need to put in place. Do any of my colleagues have questions on that?

Paul Sweeney: Thank you very much for the impressive set of recommendations so far. I found your comments compelling—you made really good points. Practical barriers seem to be having a chilling effect on engagement. Perhaps there should be statutory protection for people who want to engage in parliamentary business in some capacity, in the same way that jury duty is legally protected. People are not compelled to attend in the same way, but a protection could allow people who wanted to to engage on an issue—it could give them a legal right to do that and, for example, their employer could not discriminate against them for doing that or prevent them from doing it. It might be over the top as a solution, but it might be worth considering whether we need a statutory right for citizens to engage.

The Convener: I think that that is contained in the recommendations as we move through the report—

Paul Sweeney: Oh, is it? I must have missed that one.

The Convener: You also make reference to the Happy to Translate scheme and the ability of those whose first language is not English to follow proceedings. What was your feeling about that? I am interested to know whether any of the 19 panel members had any experience of Happy to Translate. On what basis did that come up as an option?

Maria Schwarz: At some points, we were split into different groups and we then met different target groups—one was young people; one was people from different cultural backgrounds; and another was people in poverty. I believe that that scheme came up in the group of people from different cultural backgrounds and who had experience of immigration. It was just a suggestion.

The Convener: I attended one of the informal round-table sessions that took place during the process. I was interested to know where the experience of the scheme had come from.

The second recommendation is about hearing from people with lived experience. I think that the committee can all accept that. In Parliament—in the commission on parliamentary reform, which I was on, and in the discussions that we have had—the phrase that is used is "the usual suspects", which is not always a kind thing. However, there are easy-to-reach organisations that have almost become professional witnesses across a range of issues, and it has perhaps been too easy a default and reserve for the Parliament to go to them for evidence and not necessarily seek the wider views of people with lived experience.

Did you find any examples in which the lack of lived experience had been an issue?

Maria Schwarz: No. We had a lot of lived experience. I cannot say whether it was the majority but a large number of people came in, spoke about their lived experience and backgrounds and gave us their views.

David Torrance: When I heard that 19 individuals with such different backgrounds were going to meet, I thought that it could be a recipe for disaster. However, I am really impressed with the 17 recommendations and that the group were 100 per cent in agreement on them, so I say well done to every one of the people who took part.

I have a question about engagement and individuals with lived experience. I have been in the Parliament 11 years and some of us have been here a lot longer—I am not looking at the convener. We see the same witnesses all the time. It is the same groups of self-interest. How does the Parliament reach out to get people with lived experience? How do we make the effort to go out into the communities and find people rather than getting the same groups give evidence to the committee all the time?

The Convener: That is partly what the citizens panel was doing. It had 19 people who had lived experience of their own and had not previously been engaged. I imagine that they were trying to get us to consider how to find a way to access that resource more generally when we pursue our work.

Paul Sweeney: That is an interesting point. Yesterday, we had a stage 1 debate for the Moveable Transactions (Scotland) Bill. That was a Scottish Law Commission bill that, on the face of it, was dry and technical. It related to people being able to raise finance and secure debts against moveable assets. It is primarily geared towards businesses. For example, it would enable them to raise finance against barrels of whisky or fleets of vehicles, not just land and buildings.

However, it rapidly became apparent that one of the unintended consequences of the bill was that it could open up an entire irregular lending market to consumers. Backstreet lenders could use household goods as collateral against which to raise finance or secure debts. It would be virtual pawn broking.

That became obvious only at the last point because the consultation on the bill had been focused on the banking and legal sectors. It was only because the money advice agencies brought through lived experience at the last minute that we realised that we could be opening up an explosion of unintended consequences and that the Government realised that it would have to amend the bill at stage 2 to take out consumers.

I wonder whether that is a symptom of a wider issue. Because there is such an echo chamber at times, people are not necessarily aware when they draft legislation that there are wider consequences. It could have been devastating for families if predatory lending practices had been introduced.

That is an example from a debate in Parliament yesterday where the improvement recommended would have resulted in better-quality legislation at an earlier stage if we had been able to engage with people who are at the sharp end of predatory lending practices.

The Convener: That is a practical example of how it would make a difference.

Maria, you talked about plain and transparent language. I was struck that, in a way, you were also arguing that, even if we accept all the recommendations at face value, that should not in itself be the basis on which we proceed. Work will need to be done to understand whether people accept that and believe that those things will make the difference. Is that what you were trying to suggest?

Maria Schwarz: As an example, we had the idea in our group of 19 that you could put leaflets in supermarkets about the difference between the Parliament and the Government and who people's local and regional MSPs are. As a group, we liked the idea quite well, but when we took it to third-party groups that came in to talk about the target groups, it was not that well received. I am now wondering whether you would be at risk of wasting money if you took the suggestion of our 19 people at face value. You could spend tens of thousands of pounds on printing flyers and it might be that no one would take them, or they might chuck them in the bin. That would be a shame.

The Convener: That is a cautionary note. It suggests that we should not just blunder forward but think carefully about how we progress with the recommendations.

Ronnie, you seem to be the bus advocate. That idea has caught a certain amount of media attention. We will see what colleagues think about it. Do members have any thoughts?

David Torrance: Everything is focused in the central belt, which is where I live. For rural communities and hard-to-engage areas, especially the areas of deprivation that many of us have in our constituencies, the bus would be a great way for the public to engage with Parliament. How many people in rural communities ever see what the Parliament does or engage with it? In my constituency, I have some of the areas of highest deprivation in Scotland, and it is very difficult to communicate with people in those areas. Something like a bus going into their areas or to their community hubs would promote what the Parliament does and how people can engage with it. It is a really good idea.

Paul Sweeney: I agree. The concept is interesting. The only similar example that I can think of is that Poppy Scotland converted an old truck into a mobile exhibition about the first world war. It went around Scotland and it was incredibly successful at educating people, especially young people. It was almost like a mobile museum and it was very well put together.

A Parliament bus could be a wider thing, because a large part of the issue is that a lot of people do not know where the Parliament fits in relation to the broader range of concerns that they might have about local government issues and UK Parliament issues. We potentially have a broader educational opportunity to discuss more generally the roles of the councillor, the MSP and the member of the UK Parliament in relation to local issues and needs and how people can engage effectively with all the institutions in our democratic society. A bus could be part of a broader enterprise that could be quite successful. It would be worth testing that out.

The point about the Parliament's function in relation to holding power to account is really important. It all merges into one blob in the mind of the public, so teasing that out would be useful.

I have often thought that it would be good to have a long-running fly-on-the-wall documentary that got into the mechanics of how Parliament

operates day to day, like "Inside Central Station" on the BBC. It would be a long-running programme, but it would be a kind of public service broadcasting thing that covered councils and both Parliaments and dealt with what they are like day to day—not in a political sense, but in the mechanical sense of how it all operates. That would be a very effective tool for making the public aware of how the Parliament actually works day to day, so that people were not seeing only the political theatre. I keep pitching that to the BBC, but I do not think that it is going to take me on.

The Convener: Interestingly, similar fly-on-the-wall documentaries have been done in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. They have been not about the party politics but about the clerks, the Speaker, the engineers and the maintenance and security crews. They have been about how the mechanics of Parliament operate, not about the political business that goes on in a party political sense. Even for people who are involved in politics, seeing the workings of other Parliaments is very engaging, because we get to learn how they work.

I am interested in the idea of a bus, which Ronnie Paterson mentioned. The report contains a couple of points in relation to that. I want to understand what its purpose would be. I do not want to call it a travelling museum, but the bus could be a travelling exhibit that was used as an educational tool to show people how Parliament works.

However, the report also says that the bus could be a place where the Parliament could

"talk to people about their issues".

That presumes that there would be people travelling with the bus who could do that. Did you mean that people could talk in the sense of active political engagement and that MSPs from different parties would be part of that as the bus visited different communities, or do you see it more involving education officials from the Parliament who would be there to explain the function of Parliament and how it works? I am trying to draw a distinction between those two functions.

Alternatively, did you intend it to cover both functions? Would the bus be in a place for long enough to have some sessions about the mechanics of how the Parliament works and some sessions where it could be a focal point for the public, who sometimes find it difficult to engage with politicians, to come and do so? In the modern world, we are mindful, of course, of the need to consider the security aspects for both the public and the politicians and others who would be involved. What do you see the function of the bus being when it is out and about?

Ronnie Paterson: I thought that it could be more than just educational, although educational engagement would be part of it. One of the very first things that was brought up when we started this journey was the question, "Why do people not engage?" One of the words that was used in response was "trust". There is an opportunity around going out in person in some sort of mobile unit to explore and maybe do a wee bit more to engage with people and build that trust. How that will be done, I do not know, but the idea is worth exploring.

A lot of our recommendations are about engagement, knowledge and trust, and those things all merge together. A bus would be a tool that could be used to go into the communities that do not engage at all and maybe build a wee bit of trust somewhere along the road and give them a wee bit of knowledge about the Parliament. That is never going to be a bad thing.

The Convener: Yes. We have had examples of some engagement buses that go around the country, be it on behalf of major power companies or in relation to health. There are buses that cover diet and how people might live better; one came to the Parliament not so long ago that focused on liver function, and people went out to visit it. Many of those buses can expand out the sides and the whole thing can open out to create quite a big working space. We have had engagement with organisations that have invested in such operations.

However, a key point for me relates to Maria Schwarz's point about doing more research and so on. The worst thing would be if we spent a lot of money on a bus and then sent it out to find a purpose, rather than our having an idea of what the purpose should be and then validating it through research with people on what they would like the bus to do when it was in their community. We would not want it to become a white elephant, for want of a better description, or a purple and white elephant. We would want it to do something.

I am intrigued that you see the bus as being about more than just saying, "Here's what happens in the Parliament," and that it would also involve saying, "We're discussing issues in your community today and we'd like you to come along and participate in that discussion." We would have to be careful; it could not really be a constituency surgery bus, because we could not have private conversations with people about highly personal issues that they might be struggling with. However, it could certainly be a space where we could have more open discussions.

David Torrance: I think that, if a bus is to go out, it has to promote how people can engage with the Parliament and how the Parliament can help them to engage. Once we add politicians, another

dimension would come in, which would send the whole process skew-whiff. We all know what would happen. We would take our own self-interest to heart—

The Convener: Surely not!

David Torrance: We all know it. [*Laughter.*] Let us be open and honest, no matter what. If a bus is to go out there, I really think that we need to keep politicians well clear of it.

The Convener: I am tempted to say that that might be how you do things in the Scottish National Party, but it is certainly not how we do things in my party. [*Laughter.*]

David Torrance: I would not believe that.

The Convener: I would not do that to you.

We can look into that idea. It is certainly one that we have not considered, even though this Parliament, particularly in its earlier years—the pandemic did not help in the previous session—has had much more proactive engagement than other Parliaments. Another idea that we will talk about is Parliament days.

Maria, you feel very personally committed to the next comment in the report, which is about the times when Parliament meets and people's ability to engage with it. What would you like to see in that regard? Are you saying that you would like to see a Saturday sitting of the Parliament from time to time? What might you feel interested in engaging with outwith the normal working hours of the week?

Maria Schwarz: As an example, I would be interested in being able to meet MSPs in the early evenings or at weekends. I would also be interested in an online portal where people could write down their ideas or grievances, which would be put forward to members of Parliament.

The Convener: Okay—that is helpful. After that, there is a recommendation about a web page.

David Torrance: With regard to point 5, on community engagement, and Maria's comments, is that not what MSPs are meant to do with surgeries at the weekends to make sure that the public can get to them easily in order to engage?

The Convener: Yes, but there is a distinction between that and potentially engaging with the parliamentary apparatus.

We will talk about cross-party groups later. I am interested in the importance that is attached to that. Of course, the Parliament does not really facilitate cross-party groups, so that might be something in the report that needs to be looked at again.

We will move on to the next section of the report, which is about how Parliament uses deliberative democracy. Our discussion on that will be led by Ronnie Paterson and John Sultman. Which of you will kick off?

Ronnie Paterson: John, if I talk about the other three paragraphs, will you talk about paragraph 7 first?

John Sultman: Yes—that is perfect. We talked about deliberative democracy and we heard quite a lot about it. We heard about the pros and cons and, importantly, we heard that it is a tool to be used with discretion. We feel that, if it is to be used, it needs to be embedded in legislation so that there is a proper framework for it.

Our recommendation says in bold text that the reason to legislate for deliberative democracy is

"in order to ensure that: diverse voices and communities from all parts of Scotland influence Scottish Parliament's work, and the public are consistently informed and consulted on local and national issues."

We padded the recommendation out a bit because we recognise that no one solution would fit every situation. The tool would have to be used in the appropriate places, and an appropriate framework would have to be designed.

Returning to a point that Paul MacDonald made earlier, I note that we used the analogy of jury service for the protection side, but that term does not appear in the recommendation because we did not want there to be any hint of participation being compulsory. We like all the protections that come with jury service—such as time off work, no backlash for taking time off work, and expenses being covered—but we wanted to be very clear that there should be no compulsion beyond a similar process to the way that we were recruited. Letters went out that said, "If you are interested, fill this out." They also said, "If not, put this letter in the bin," which I am sure is what happened to a lot of the letters.

We quite like the idea of an annually recurring citizens panel that has agenda-setting powers. Jonathan Moskovic from Belgium discussed that quite a bit, and we really like how it has worked. The idea of giving a representative group of the public the ability to decide, or partially decide, what is at the top of the list for discussion is really attractive to us.

Another thing that came up during that conversation was the idea of MSPs being directly involved in the panels, albeit very much as a minority and with a set-up that meant that they did not take over the conversation. It was felt that, if MSPs were in there meeting the panel members and getting a bit invested, it is more likely that things would come to fruition. That is all that I have to say on recommendation 7.

11:15

Ronnie Paterson: Recommendation 8 is:

"Build a strong evidence base for deliberative democracy to determine its effectiveness and develop a framework for measuring impact".

That goes back to what was said about the fact that we came together as a group, which is in itself quite a strong evidence base that that can work.

Recommendation 9 is:

"Build cross-party support for deliberative democracy as this is needed for it to work".

That is crucial. We have representative democracy, but deliberative democracy is quite far away from that. I do not know whether those two approaches to democracy rub up against each other, but we definitely need to look at how we can build cross-party support for deliberative democracy.

Recommendation 10, which is the final recommendation in that section, says:

"one of the panels which should be set up is a specific people's panel to discuss the MSPs' code of conduct".

That goes back to the idea of trust and public accountability in that area. There might be some questions regarding that.

The Convener: John Sultman spoke about the recommendation of a timeline for receiving responses. An issue that arose in our inquiry, but which had exercised committee colleagues before we began it, was the sense of expectation that is raised among those who participate about what will happen to the work that they do.

I wonder whether there was an understanding—perhaps Maria Schwarz has confirmed that there was—that a group of people can come forward with a series of recommendations, but that that does not necessarily mean that they can or should be pursued because, when we look into them further with other people, they might not find wider favour.

Is the suggestion about building in a process timeline a response to that concern about expectation and ensuring that there is a deliverable end result for those who have participated? Is that the reasoning?

John Sultman: Yes—very much so. I return to the barriers that are mentioned in recommendation 1. Across the process, one of the barriers is the sense that people express when they say, "Why should I bother?" Times are tough for people and everybody has constraints on their time, as Maria Schwarz pointed out. There was a general feeling that people express by saying, "Why should I bother engaging with this if it's going to make no difference at all?"

Not everything that is suggested will go forward—we are all adults and we accept that—but if we never hear feedback, it reinforces the mentality of people asking, "Why should I bother?" A bit later in our recommendations, we address the need to have a solid framework for feedback. That has come up with everyone in my social circle who I have spoken to about this. People say, "If something isn't going to happen, just tell us—don't leave it in limbo."

That also feeds into Ronnie Paterson's recurring point about trust. We need to trust you, but you also need to trust us, and part of that is that, if something is impractical or it is just not going to fit with the general direction of travel, you should tell people that within a reasonable timescale. If the timescale is structured, people can think, for example, "It's only been X amount of time. They will get back to me in Y amount of time, so I know I haven't been forgotten." The timeline is particularly important, and there is a whole recommendation that addresses that later in the report.

The Convener: We will come to that recommendation. Thank you. Another question that arose is in relation to what you said about an annually recurring citizens panel. Was that born out of your experience? Did you imagine Parliament hosting a weekend event like the one in which you all participated, or did you imagine a different framework for the annual citizens panel? In your suggestion, it would almost be leading the way and setting the agenda for what would follow in local panels and communities. Would it have a life of its own or would it have, as your panel did, a genesis here in the Parliament?

John Sultman: We were open to debate on that. It is an idea that Jonathan Moscovic from the Belgian group discussed a lot. Many of us found it attractive.

We met over two weekends and a couple of online sessions. There was a journey from, as you saw on the first evening, 19 people staring at one another a little bit nervously to the last hour on the final Sunday and the sessions that came after that, when we were a group of people forging ahead with something.

An annual panel would probably start with a fresh group each year, because that would be the point. It would have to have sufficient time to create that bond because, as I said, there is a process to the group coming together to be effective—I think that, in old-fashioned managementspeak, it is described as storming, norming and performing—and that would be quite a thing. More research would need to be done on how to build on that and have regional panels, but it definitely should be looked at.

The Convener: Is Paul Sweeney or David Torrance prompted to ask any questions on this section?

Paul Sweeney: I fully agree with what has been said. There is nothing to add.

David Torrance: Recommendation 10 is that a panel should be set up

"to discuss the MSPs' code of conduct".

That is interesting, because we have had difficulties in the past with the code of conduct and the behaviour of some MSPs.

The Convener: We have a code of conduct, so I was struck by that, too. The reference to the code of conduct could cover many things. Was there something that the panel, as people watching MSPs perform, felt that the code of conduct could address that the existing code does not?

David Torrance: I was interested in that, because I wondered whether it was about people complaining that their MSP does not hold any surgeries or is not engaging in the community and asking whether he can be held to account for that.

John Sultman: If I can be brutally frank, a general mistrust of politics has grown up over the past few years and we might as well address it. I do not think that having public engagement in the code of conduct would change a huge amount, but I will give some recommendations.

One thing that was made clear to us is that each MSP is a sovereign entity and how they manage their constituency matters is down to them. The code should not necessarily address that, but we talk later in the report about

"a minimum standard of response",

and perhaps that could be worked into the code.

If anything, the panel to discuss the code of conduct would be an opportunity for the public to see what they expect from their MSPs. I strongly believe that there will be a 99 per cent overlap anyway but having that engagement would be the biggest thing that you could do to build trust apart from the feedback. As Ronnie Paterson said, that trust is essential.

Ronnie Paterson: The idea came about for me when I read through the code of conduct. There is not a lot of it to begin with. I have watched some things on television to do with Parliament and, like others, am not happy with some of the things that happen there, such as showboating. That is unappealing to watch and does not create a lot of trust.

The reason why I brought that into the discussion was to ask whether there is a way in which we can build a bit more trust, public responsibility and transparency in what people do, how they conduct themselves and the things that they say in Parliament. That goes along with the point that we made about giving the Presiding Officer more power. It is important that we have transparency and honesty. Sometimes, those qualities are not there in what we see on television from the Parliament.

The Convener: I was intrigued as to where that was coming from. I wondered whether you were identifying politicians who go and spend time in the jungle with celebrities—obviously, a Conservative politician from Westminster has done that and, previously, a Labour politician from the Scottish Parliament—or whether it was something else. You referred to the showboating of politicians in the Parliament. Dear me—I am sure that I have been accused of that from time to time. Sometimes, it is the way we keep ourselves entertained. Was the issue the absence of evidence of individuals doing a function or individuals abdicating that responsibility, or was it their conduct in undertaking that responsibility in Parliament?

One complicating issue in these matters is that half of the members of the committee, such as David Torrance and me, are elected on a first-past-the-post basis to represent a specific constituency and the other half—for example, Paul Sweeney—are elected to represent a broader region. The workstreams that we have are nuanced differently because of those different responsibilities. What might seem an appropriate diet of work for a constituency MSP is quite different from that for someone who represents a region.

I am not trying to be difficult here; I am just trying to understand what has exercised the feeling that looking at the code of conduct would be useful.

Ronnie Paterson: It goes back to my lack of knowledge about the workings of Government and so on. As a normal member of the public who dips in to politics occasionally and watches the news on television, I sometimes mistrust what I see. That is where it came from. My idea was to ask, "How do we change that? How do we build trust? How do we have transparency and public accountability?" However, I do not know whether that should be through a look at the code of conduct or something else.

The Convener: The third section is on public involvement in parliamentary business. Gillian Ruane has been sitting patiently. Gillian and John will lead on this section.

Gillian Ruane: Recommendation 11 is:

"Carry out a cost-benefit analysis of the Parliament itself or committees meeting outside of Holyrood and compare

this to (a) more support and targeted invitations for people to come to Holyrood and (b) reinstating Parliament days (MSPs going out into communities for a day of activity)."

There is no point in doing that if it will cost a fortune and no one will turn up, so you would probably need to look at the costs of that and how the general public would engage with it first.

More support and targeted invitations for people to come to Holyrood would be good. When we were first invited here, I believe that 4,800 invitations went out to people chosen randomly by the Royal Mail; you then registered your interest and were selected. One thing that we have done throughout all this has been to target the people who looked at that invitation, threw it the bin and said, "That's not for me." We tried to get them to look again and be more involved in the Parliament, because the Parliament is separate from the Government. We have found that out now, but we did not really know that at first.

MSPs would go out into communities for a day of activity, not to speak to specific groups. That could be on the Parliament buses or whatever—just get out and speak to the people. MSPs have surgeries, but going into one can be daunting for people. If you took yourselves out to communities and allowed people to ask, "What is the hold-up here?" you would get a good response.

Recommendation 12 is:

"Set a 9-month deadline as a default for feedback on the outcome of any engagement with clear reasons where this deadline would not be met (if applicable)."

The Convener: John Sultman referred to that a moment ago when I talked about a more detailed programme. Fair enough.

Gillian Ruane: Yes. We go on to say:

"The live status of the decision making process should be clear and transparent throughout."

If people put an idea to Parliament but do not get any clear response within a deadline, they disengage. If they are told, "We are getting round to it, we are getting round to it," they do not feel that MSPs will ever get round to their issue.

We say that Parliament could create a minimum standard of response, with an initial acknowledgment of engagement, which would say, basically, "We have got your message," and would be followed up by an explanation of how many responses there will be and how the issue will be dealt with next. We also say that there should be follow-up communication on the outcome of the inquiry; signposting to more information; a traffic light system for inquiries, flagging up what has been addressed and what has not; and monitoring of calls logged, with rules about how long someone will have to wait for a response. We have interacted with the parliamentary clerks very well throughout the process and have found them to be extremely keen on engagement, as are all the MSPs present today.

11:30

Having such a minimum standard of response would show people that their participation is worth while and make them feel that their voice is being heard. Legislation and inquires can take a long time, so expectations should be set clearly from the start, and consideration should be given to how you will keep people involved in the longer term. If you do not do this, it will fuel apathy and mistrust.

That leads us on to recommendation 13. At the meeting that was attended by the Parliament's chief executive, David McGill, Ronnie Paterson asked a question that I cannot remember entirely but which was about getting ministers to answer questions in the chamber. David McGill said that the Parliament cannot tell people to answer a question. Therefore, we have made a recommendation that the Presiding Officer should have the power to compel MSPs to give a direct reply that is relevant to the question that they have been asked. We say that that mechanism should include a process for a deferred answer if an immediate answer cannot be given—that is, if they do not know, they should say so, and say that they will find out the answer and get back to the questioner. We feel that that will improve public trust and engagement.

The Convener: That point has excited quite a bit of attention. It is an interesting issue. The commission on parliamentary reform, of which I was a member, also considered that issue, and we know that the equivalent of the Presiding Officer in the Republic of Ireland's Parliament can say that a question has not been answered, and that is regarded as a fairly significant admonishment, which has led to that power not having to be exercised, as no one wants to be found to have fallen short of what is required of them in that regard.

There is one more recommendation in this group, which I understand that John Sultman will speak to.

John Sultman: Recommendation 14 involves scheduling specific time for individual public questions to be asked. We were not quite sure of the best format for that, and we did not want it to be too staged, which was the case with some things that we saw a few years ago. We also saw some powerful examples of an individual member of the public putting a question directly to a minister. We feel that, as a form of engagement, that has some real potential, if it is set up properly.

That is a bit of a vague recommendation, because we are not sure quite what the best way to do that is, but we think that it is well worth considering.

Paul Sweeney: I am sympathetic to that point, because the issue of contempt for Parliament is not well enforced, which I have found to be quite frustrating, particularly in the chamber. Enhanced powers for the Presiding Officer to compel relevant, timely and succinct answers would be good. Sometimes, responses can be almost antisocial, as they consume time—they can, in effect, become filibustering, with someone havering on for a minute and a half without getting to the point, which is designed to push other questions off the shelf, so the minister has to answer fewer questions. In other legislatures, such as the Irish Dáil, the equivalent of the Presiding Officer has the power to stop a minister if that is happening.

People should treat the chamber with the respect that they would treat a courtroom, in the sense that they should give relevant and punchy answers, and the questions should be succinct and to the point, too, and should not go off on a minute-long preamble. It might be possible to tighten up the standing orders to make the Parliament more rigorous with regard to how questions are addressed.

The Convener: I know that, often, when I am playing fantasy Presiding Officer, I consider banning the use of notes during question times. Obviously, I would have exceptions for people who require them for various reasons, but I would certainly ban ministers using notes that are read out as speeches and would allow only the use of notes as something to refer to.

I would like the Presiding Officer to have the power to say, "Minister, this is not an opportunity for you to give a speech. You are answering a question—you can refer to your note, but you can't spend the next three minutes just reading it out." That can be quite frustrating, because that three-minute exposition gets nowhere near answering the original question. Members get very frustrated, only to be told that the Presiding Officer has no control over what the minister has said. I therefore think that the suggestion would be a way of addressing that.

Paul Sweeney: It is an interesting question. I have had the opportunity to participate in Prime Minister's questions, and I know that the Prime Minister does not get advance sight of the questions. The order paper has numbers and members' names; it is just sudden death, which is why there is a stack of notes that is gone through frantically. Frequently, the response will be something like, "That's a really interesting point—I'll get my officials or the relevant minister to respond." That is usually quite good for constituency issues, because it can result in such matters getting escalated very rapidly, and you can get quite a decent outcome.

I therefore wonder whether there should be something else, instead of having some preamble in the *Business Bulletin*, which then leads to a pre-scripted response. Sometimes, though, that can be helpful; if you want a detailed answer on something, you might well volunteer to give the minister the information in advance. I just think that a different format would be an interesting way of changing things up a bit and could improve the relevance of responses—or, perhaps, make people keener to respond.

The Convener: This cannot become just a dialogue between you and me, Mr Sweeney, but I should point out that the commission on parliamentary reform looked at the matter, too, and there was quite strong resistance from the Government to allowing things to be that open, arguing that it would lead to less constructive answers to questions.

I should say that, in the 2011 to 2016 parliamentary session, I was able to attend Parliament open days in Oban, Dumfries and Stornoway. The Stornoway one was very well supported by the public; indeed, several hundred people attended the evening event, but perhaps that was because we were on one of the islands and the whole concept of the Parliament going there was very much seen differently.

David, I cannot remember—were you on the Public Petitions Committee at that point?

David Torrance: Yes, I was.

The Convener: I see that you want to come in on that, too. The Oban day was quite well supported, while the one in Dumfries was not very well supported at all. It was interesting; having been to the one in Stornoway, which was a big success, I thought, "This is wonderful," only to go to Parliament days in other places where nobody seemed very interested in coming at all. That said, they were worthwhile initiatives that could be thought through and taken forward a bit further, although I go back to Maria Schwarz's earlier point about ensuring that, whatever you do, it is something that people actually want to participate in.

David Torrance: I was just going to talk about recommendation 11 in the report. Nobody will be surprised to learn that I would promote the Parliament and the committees going out into communities. In addition to the examples that you have highlighted, convener, I would also mention our visit to Loch Fyne and the Rest and Be Thankful.

The Convener: That was the Oban one.

David Torrance: That was, if you will remember, quite well attended, because I think that I was the chair that day. That sort of engagement works; it was not just a matter of going out there and simply doing what the committee was designed to do. At the end of each of the days, we had a general question-and-answer session with the public about how the Parliament worked, and it was good to see it promoted in that way.

The Convener: It is important to tell our visitors that part of those Parliament days was a public session of the Public Petitions Committee, of which David Torrance and I were members, and we were hearing petitions specifically from people from those communities. One or two led to fundamental changes on behalf of communities; indeed, I remember one that related to what was known as the Tinkers' Heart, which was a historic landmark—a burial ground, almost—for people from the Travelling community. The site was in a very poor state of repair, and it was subsequently adopted, with formal access. That was the reason for our participation, and it was, I think, quite invigorating to go out to where the petition had originated instead of our bringing the petitioners here.

If there are no other questions, I will just come back to recommendation 14, on having some kind of debating time in the chamber with the public. Has that recommendation come about as a result of your view that digital communications have improved to the point of allowing the public to participate in that way? What were you imagining—some formal session of the Parliament at which members of the public could be present or at which their questions could be introduced in some digital way? Were you just raising the concept and leaving things a bit more open with regard to the detail?

John Sultman: We discussed a number of options and looked at things that had previously happened, from MSPs reading out questions from constituents through to people appearing on video, as we saw in Covid briefings, or attending personally and so on. We thought that they all had merit and that further research and discussion would be needed as to what would be best. Speaking personally, I quite like the idea of a member of the public being directly in the chamber—it seems more authentic to me. However, I think that the other ideas would work just as well.

The Convener: Thank you. That brings us to the final section of the report, which is "Communication and Education". Paul MacDonald and Gillian Ruane will lead on this section.

Paul MacDonald: Gillian, do you want to start?

Gillian Ruane: Recommendation 15 says:

"Use media outlets, documentaries and short films to highlight Parliament successes and real life stories of engagement to improve public perception and trust."

One of the main things that I found—this relates to what we were saying about the powers of the Presiding Officer—was that, when I spoke to colleagues and friends, they said, "Why would I engage with the Parliament? I don't trust them; they don't answer questions, they waffle for 20 minutes and they say nothing." They were as blunt as that—sorry.

Using media outlets, documentaries and short films would highlight the successes that you have, because some of the successes are really good, but people do not know about them. As the report sets out, the Parliament

"needs to do more to tell people about its engagement and participation work, as those it reaches are positive about the experience."

Word of mouth probably works better when it comes to such positive experiences. Although radio, television, newspapers and community groups can be used, as we note in the report,

"The public sometimes find it easier to digest information by way of another person telling them",

rather than by getting it through the TV.

Paul MacDonald: Recommendation 16 is:

"The Parliament should run a general information campaign explaining the role of the Scottish Parliament",

using things such as brochures or leaflets. Basically, that recommendation was made because there is a lot of mistrust in politics in general. If people understood that there was a separation from Government, they might be keener to engage with Parliament, because it almost seems as though Parliament is less political—it is less polarising than some of the rest of the political landscape at the moment. I feel that there has been a lessening of trust in Government in particular. If people appreciated that there was a division between Parliament and Government and that there is an organisation that is more impartial and is working for them, they would be more likely to get involved, rather than feeling as though they are sitting outside it all and feeling angry about what is happening in their country.

Gillian Ruane: Recommendation 17, which is something that one of my colleagues was quite passionate about, says:

"The Parliament should hold an inquiry into the relationship between the aims of the current curriculum and the Parliament to explore systematic changes that can be made throughout schools and in communities to improve children and young people's knowledge and awareness of

Parliament—and deliberative democracy—including through mentorships, internships and competitions."

Our collective vision is that

"by the Parliament's 25th anniversary there should be a clear plan in place so that by the Parliament's 30th anniversary, all young people of voting age have clear understanding and knowledge about engaging with Parliament and Government and all see engaging with Parliament as a normal aspect of everyday life."

Therefore, we would not need panels to teach people how to be engaged.

The Convener: Thank you. Does Paul Sweeney or David Torrance have any questions on this section?

Paul Sweeney: It is a powerful set of recommendations. We all get repeat customers in relation to casework inquiries. It can often be a core set of people who are always coming back to us about issues because they have tapped into the mechanism of how to do it. That does not mean that the mechanism of how to do it is widely known about; it can be quite an arcane procedure and it can also be quite intimidating to get in touch with an MSP or an MP. I think that it would be useful to make that process more accessible.

From time to time, we get mass email campaigns, whereby a campaign organisation will create an information box that allows people to punch in an address and then send a model response on a campaign issue. We can get thousands of duplicate emails, to which we have to do a mass response. That can be fine from the point of view of perfunctory engagement, and it is broadly used to signal mass interest in a particular issue, but it is not a form of close engagement.

11:45

I suggest that the Parliament might be able to create a better interface that people could use to write to their MSP. It might be a matter of scanning a QR code on, for example, a bus shelter advertisement, which could bring up a pro forma document that provides their constituency and regional MSPs, asks about the nature of their issue and gives the text to fill out the box. That would make it easier to send an email; it might be less intimidating than having to sit and manually type it all out. That might make the process somewhat simpler.

There could also be a call-back service—if someone requested a call back on an issue, they could get a phone call—or a surgery booking service. Perhaps it would be better for the Parliament to have an interface on its website for doing such things, rather than people having to rely on individual MSPs' social media and websites for information, because the quality of that information can be highly variable. That is just a thought.

There is also the TheyWorkForYou website, which makes engagement a bit easier, but that might not be the easiest of interfaces.

The Convener: I am struck by the conflation of the Parliament and the Government. Sometimes, people in the Government might cynically think that the Parliament is part of the Government, but it is not.

It is interesting that, on reflection, most of the communications that people receive are from the Government—for example, they might be mailings to households relating to the pandemic, when the Government felt that it had to communicate, or national Government priorities—or from individual MSPs, potentially by way of an annual report. Such reports should not be party political, because the Parliament does not fund such things, but I know that some members find it difficult for those not to be just a collection of photos of things that they have done, given that there is a limit on what they can describe about their activities.

People also receive leaflets from political parties, which are, of course, much more pejorative. Given that we live in a United Kingdom with two Parliaments, those are often directed not at anything in particular in terms of institutions, but at politics elsewhere.

I am struck by the fact that, through the exercise that you were all involved with, you very much felt that the blurring of the lines between the Parliament and the Government affected how you thought about the Parliament as an institution, separate from the Government, with which the public can engage directly. Is that correct?

Paul MacDonald: Yes, I certainly picked up that feeling among the panel group. It is a general feeling—it does not relate only to politics in Scotland—that comes from the global media. As a result of politicians from Donald Trump to Boris Johnson, people have less trust in Government in general and in the whole institution. They are less likely to get involved and engage with those institutions because the system seems so unjust and illogical. If they were aware that there was a more supportive organisation—as I said, an impartial institution—they might be more keen to get involved.

The Convener: As it happens, I sit on the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, which is entrusted with running the functional aspects of the Parliament. One of the groups that we hear from is the Parliament's educational unit, which engages with schools. For the past few months, that unit has been involved in trying to understand how to reach the many schools that do not currently seek to participate with the Parliament.

We get lots of educational groups coming to the Parliament—if you watch the chamber, you might see them in the lower section of the public gallery—but it is often the same schools that come every year. Lots of schools do not come.

Gillian, you said that that issue needs to be looked at in some detail. You talk about potential mentorships and internships—which can sometimes be controversial, because people feel that it is unpaid labour or whatever—and more competitions. However, you felt that the group in the Parliament that is currently looking at that is right to do so, because there is a need to think of different ways to encourage the active interest of young people.

Gillian Ruane: I imagine that it should also be non-partisan, so that it is not about indoctrination by one political party but about being a collective group. It is Parliament, not a political party, that should teach young people to engage better.

David Torrance: Recommendation 17 is important, because if we can engage with young people and reach out to them, they will engage with the Parliament much more easily in later life. The Parliament is only just over 20 years old. For many people in Scotland, this Parliament was not here when they were younger or even middle-aged, so it is unlikely that they would have engaged with it at any time in their lives. That is a key point.

On the point about mentorships, internships and competitions, I run a Christmas card competition for school kids, but I could not offer them a prize in the Parliament—a day out in the Parliament and a meal, for example. As you know, that is not allowed. That should be looked at. I have six or seven primary schools involved in my Christmas card competition, which is great.

The Convener: Yes, it is the same thing for me. As you say, we currently almost put obstacles in the way of participation with schools. It can be quite difficult for politicians to be proactive, because some schools are sensitive to the idea that that might not necessarily be about promoting the work of the Parliament but about promoting a particular political ideology, which can create concern for local education authorities. That is an important point.

Thank you all very much. It has been a fascinating conversation. I will go back to each of you for a final thought that you would like to leave the committee with. I will do it in the same order as when I started, beginning with Ronnie Paterson. What would you like to say to us as your final thought?

Ronnie Paterson: As an exercise, it has been a great success to bring forward our recommendations as a group. Doing that together

as a random group of people has been amazing, and I would love to see that happening again, whether that is on a national level or at the level of a local issue. It would be great to take that forward. If anybody has the chance to do anything like this, I would recommend that they jump into it, neck deep.

Maria Schwarz: I ask you to not give up if something does not immediately stick. If you try something and, after two months, you feel that you do not have enough people, keep going with it. It might take a while for word to get out that it even exists, and then people will come.

Paul MacDonald: I was surprised to learn how many people on the panel have always been keen to engage or had strongly held views that they wanted to feed back. It is a free resource for the Parliament. There are so many people who are willing to put work in for very little cost, and there is the technology to make it a low-cost process. Ultimately, it will benefit everyone, because it will give people a greater feeling of ownership and trust in the country and in the Government itself. Anything that boosts people's trust of the political establishments will be hugely beneficial.

Gillian Ruane: I would say that if the Scottish Government and MSPs have aspirations for Scotland to be a world leader in democracy, let us first get the trust, let us have that honesty and let us get people engaged because they know that they will get a timely and honest reply. I loved the experience.

John Sultman: I want to repeat Maria Schwarz's point that this will be a long-term goal, and I hope that you guys really do stick with it.

I would like to take a second to thank the anonymous staff who have made this experience fascinating. They have managed us so well. They let us wander our own path but somehow kept us from falling off the cliff. I look forward to hearing feedback on our work.

The Convener: Thank you very much. Ronnie Paterson, Paul MacDonald, Gillian Ruane, John Sultman and Maria Schwarz, thank you all for joining us. I thank you and your colleagues for participating, and I know that your kind thanks to the many officials who were involved in assisting with the process will have been noted and appreciated. We look forward to discussing the report and to having further consultation and discussion on it with our colleagues. I hope that you will feel that, in due course, it produces results that you feel are worth while.

We will now move into private session.

11:55

Meeting continued in private until 12:10.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.