**[Public participation inquiry](https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/committees/current-and-previous-committees/session-6-citizen-participation-and-public-petitions-committee/business-items/public-participation-inquiry)**

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

July 2022

**Age Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee’s call for views about public participation and the Scottish Parliament.**

**1. In your experience, which group/s are currently under-represented in the work of the Scottish Parliament and why do you think this?**

Although many older people follow politics, vote in elections, contact their MSPs to seek support, and take up opportunities to get involved in campaigning, we know there are groups of older people who are currently under-represented in the work of the Scottish Parliament – including older people from ethnic minorities, older LGBTQ+ people, older disabled people, older people living in poverty, older people living with dementia and older unpaid carers, among others. This may be due to systemic and practical obstacles affecting their participation, including digital exclusion, not being given a platform to have their say, and language barriers, or feelings of disengagement with or mistrust in politics.

The Scottish Parliament is everyone’s Parliament, so it is important that it is accessible and open to all. With only 20% of respondents to Age Scotland’s Big Survey, a snapshot of what it is like to be an older person in Scotland today, stating they believe older people are valued for their contribution to society, ensuring older people, particularly those from marginalised groups, feel empowered to be involved in the Scottish Parliament’s work is crucial. Enabling people from different backgrounds to share their views and lived experience will result in better parliamentary scrutiny, and we look forward to following the progress of this inquiry in addition to the ongoing work of the Participation and Communities Team.

**Disengagement and lack of trust**

The Scottish Parliament scrutinises and considers many important issues which play a part in everyone’s lives. However, people can be put off from engaging due to a lack of trust, disengagement, and a lack of awareness.

There has been much discussion recently about the lack of trust in politicians and politics. The John Smith Centre has highlighted that older people tend to be less trusting of politicians than younger age groups.[[1]](#footnote-2) In the most recent Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, there was a 24 percentage point gap between those in the youngest age group and those in the oldest age group in their trust in the Scottish Government to act in Scotland’s best interests.[[2]](#footnote-3) However, the same survey found that 94% of respondents over the age of 65 thought it was either ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ important to vote in Scottish Parliament elections.[[3]](#footnote-4) 95% of 45-54 year olds and 93% of 55-64 year olds said the same. This is encouraging as it shows people feel it is important to vote in Scottish Parliament elections, even if a lack of trust in politicians and government is a common feeling.

Anecdotally, our community development team report there is a sense of lack of trust in politics from some of the older people from ethnic minorities we work with. This is characterised by the feeling that politicians overpromise on what they can deliver. If members of the public perceive that politicians mislead and embellish the truth, trust in the political system will be damaged by this expectation of dishonesty. While distrust in politicians is not within the Scottish Parliament’s control to fix single-handedly, it is good to be aware of this as an issue affecting engagement levels.

If people do not see the Scottish Parliament as somewhere where they see themselves represented, where their issues are considered, and where they can have a voice, it can be difficult to build up trust and confidence. Although there have been positive steps in terms of the diversity of MSPs themselves, there is still further to go to ensure people from under-represented groups can see their communities represented by MSPs who understand their needs.

To promote trust and engagement with the Scottish Parliament, “buy-in” must be secured – however, we sometimes encounter a sense of reluctance from older people to share their views as part of Government and parliamentary calls for views and scrutiny, as they feel that things “will not change” as a result. Those who have previously engaged tell us they find the lack of action, progress or change that follows frustrating – particularly if they have invested time and effort in sharing their views. Others feel that efforts to engage merely go over the same ground when the main issues at hand have not changed.

More generally, many members of the public do not follow the work of the Scottish Parliament closely and therefore may not be aware of the various opportunities to get involved and share their views and experiences. Although the Parliament’s work is often covered in the news and on social media, it can sometimes get lost in the range of other issues dominating the news cycle. People will also be dealing with concerns which they may judge to be more pressing in their everyday lives, which can hinder their participation. However, many of those who do want to participate may not be afforded opportunities or given a platform to have their say and be recognised for their contributions, expertise, and insight.

**Digital Exclusion**

Digital exclusion is a factor which could impact someone’s ability to engage with the Scottish Parliament – particularly during the last two years when public health restrictions were in place and physical access to the Parliament was limited. In Scotland, around 500,000 over 50s do not have access to the internet and up to 600,000 over 50s do not have a smart phone. The reasons behind not being online will vary from person to person, and for some this will be a deliberate choice. However, for others, it may be due to living in an area with poor connectivity, because they feel they don’t have the confidence or skills needed, or because they cannot afford the necessary equipment or cost of a broadband connection. According to the Scottish Household Survey, older people in the ‘most deprived’ areas are less likely to use the internet than in the ‘least deprived’ areas – and this gap may widen as the cost of living rises and people cut back on spending. Evidence shows that disabled people are more likely to face digital exclusion. Ethnic minority older people are also at risk of digital exclusion due to language barriers, affordability concerns, or finding new learning challenging.

**Language and Communications**

Language and communication barriers will also influence people’s ability to engage with the Scottish Parliament. People with communications needs and whose first language is not necessarily English need to be able to participate too. Some older people from ethnic minority groups may not be able to read or write in their first language or in English, which can present a practical barrier to sharing their views in formal calls for evidence.

**2. What could the Scottish Parliament do to make it easier for these groups to be involved in the Parliament’s work?**

In order to ensure everyone can engage with the Scottish Parliament, the Parliament should strive to avoid digital-only options. While hybrid approaches to parliamentary business have increased flexibility and the ability to participate for some people, including those in rural areas who face travel barriers and for people with accessibility needs, non-digital means should be retained.

People who do not have digital access must be able to follow parliamentary proceedings and be given the same opportunities to contribute. This can be achieved by ensuring there are wider methods of engagement employed during calls for evidence and other pieces of business than merely inviting written views or responses to online surveys – for instance, visits, allowing people to submit written evidence by post and facilitating less formalised processes such as informal sessions and discussions which allow people to engage with MSPs and the Parliament. Every older person will have different communication preferences, so ensuring channel choice is essential. The Scottish Parliament should also continue with efforts to reach out and support groups who have not previously been engaged with to offer support to ensure they are confident and comfortable participating. Widely advertising opportunities to feed into the work of the Parliament and work programme of Committees via a range of channels, including traditional print media and radio, and working closely with community groups may help under-represented groups to engage. Specifically targeting these groups and advertising opportunities to them will also help. People’s likelihood of participation and engagement levels will likely increase if there is the opportunity to talk about issues which they have an interest in and which are relevant to them. Employing less formalised methods of engagement, such as visits and outreach sessions, will help to involve these groups in the work of the Parliament as many people can be put off by perceptions about hierarchy or not feeling they are important enough to be taken seriously.

To tackle language and communication barriers to participation, information about the Scottish Parliament, its work, and how to get involved should be facilitated and provided in different language options and different formats, including easy read, audio, large print and Braille. Not all ethnic minority older people face language barriers, and those who do not can be a voice for others and can help make links through connections in their community.

Wider awareness raising of the Scottish Parliament and its processes might help to increase people’s knowledge and confidence, widening the range of people who get involved with the Parliament’s work. For instance, the Public Petitions system is arguably not that well known, but is an effective way for members of the public to raise issues and influence change.

**5. Thinking about the groups you have identified as being under-represented in our work, are you aware of any good examples of organisations working in a creative/supportive way to hear the views of these groups? If so, can you tell us more about what this involved?**

Age Scotland hosts the About Dementia project which works closely with people living with dementia and their unpaid carers to co-develop policy and practice solutions and involve those with lived experience in discussions about what matters to them most. Members of About Dementia are able to take part in different sub-groups focusing on different topics, including the human rights of unpaid carers and the human rights of people living with dementia. About Dementia colleagues also host drop-in sessions, including a monthly session focused on policy. The Participation and Communities Team presented at one of the recent policy drop-ins and asked for feedback on what would make parliamentary engagement easier for both people living with dementia and unpaid carers. Attendees found this a valuable opportunity, and it would be good to explore how this session could be replicated in future with this group of under-represented people and with others who have not historically engaged with the Scottish Parliament, if plans to do so are not already in place.

**7. We want to involve under-represented communities in designing improvements to the way that we work. In your view, how can we best do this?**

Any outreach efforts must include meaningful engagement with under-represented groups and communities – anything tokenistic should be avoided, as this may put people off even further. Involving grassroots organisations and local community groups will be particularly important to target and involve groups who haven’t been engaged with previously. Building up partnerships with communities can help to reach different audiences and establish trust.

The Scottish Parliament should aim to meet the diverse needs of older people by working with them to understand what these needs are and to ensure that activities and information are organised around these. This could involve events for MSPs in their constituencies or regions aimed at bringing people together from the local area and hearing their views. There is an opportunity to work with older people from under-represented groups, to ensure their voices are heard and they are given the opportunity to be involved in decision making. We often hear from ethnic minority older people, LGBTQ+ older people and others that they want to be given a place at the table when their needs are being discussed. However, older people from ethnic minorities have told us that they do not want to be pigeonholed into solely discussing their experiences of marginalisation and have insight to offer more widely.

**8.** **Which networks should we connect with to make sure we reach people in the under-represented groups you’ve highlighted?**

As a membership organisation, Age Scotland’s Community Development team supports a broad network of older people’s groups, organisations, and services across Scotland. The team works to empower our member groups by providing information, advice, resources, and support. We would be pleased to help facilitate efforts to involve older people’s groups in the work of the Scottish Parliament – for instance during efforts to listen to people with lived experience, fact finding visits, or other events aimed at boosting participation. This would help to ensure older people can have their voices heard and to strengthen the connection between them and their Parliament. We’d also be very happy to work with the Scottish Parliament’s Participation and Communities Team to ensure that we are doing all we can as an organisation to empower individuals to participate and help and equip them to do so – for instance in helping to facilitate visits to Parliament for our member groups or sessions with the team to learn about parliamentary processes and how to get involved.

We would like to highlight the recent formal re-launch of the Scottish Ethnic Minority Older People Forum, which aims to empower ethnic minority older people, and suggest this group would have lots of insight to offer and could help to reach under-represented older people. Since its launch in 2018, the forum has worked to raise the collective voice of ethnic minority older people, ensure that services consider the needs of ethnic minority people and challenge inequality and discrimination, including poverty and barriers to accessing information. The forum has 20 members from a wide range of ethnic minorities and is now hosted and supported by Age Scotland.

Age Scotland is also currently in the process of establishing the Scottish LGBTQ+ Older People’s Network. The purpose of the Network is to stimulate debate, share information and discuss the common issues to influence change. The membership of the Network is made up of LGBTQ + individuals, groups and organisations. It will be led by its members and supported by the diversity and inclusion team at Age Scotland. Those who have been involved in setting up the Network have told us that they want to be included in the debate and discussions about their needs going forward. Once this work has progressed, we would be happy to facilitate efforts for the Network to link up with the Scottish Parliament.

1. **How will we know if we have been successful?**

One way to measure success will be to collect data on the diversity of people engaging with the work of the Scottish Parliament, including witnesses at Committees but also participants at engagement and outreach events, petitioners, and written evidence submissions. This data could then be used to evaluate where gaps remain and determine which groups and communities should be prioritised.

The first step to improving representation is to acknowledge there is a gap and that many older people have not been encouraged or able to participate. Even if efforts to involve people who have not been engaged with before only results in small improvements at first, it will help to encourage others who may have been reluctant to come forward to get involved.

**Want to find out more?**

As Scotland’s national charity supporting people over the age of 50, Age Scotland works to improve older people’s lives and promote their rights and interests. We aim to help people love later life, whatever their circumstances. We want Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow older.

Our Policy, Communications and Campaigns team research, analyse and comment on a wide range of public policy issues affecting older people in Scotland.

Our work is guided by the views and needs of older people themselves.

**Further information**

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1. <https://www.johnsmithcentre.com/research/the-age-gap-young-people-and-trust/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-social-attitudes-2019-attitudes-government-political-engagement/pages/4/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-social-attitudes-2019-attitudes-government-political-engagement/pages/1/> figure 4.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)