Digital Innovation and Public Engagement at the Scottish Parliament

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INTRODUCTION

This article provides an overview of how the Scottish Parliament's public engagement strategies and use of digital platforms and tools has evolved over time. The content on current services is mainly focussed on work that the Parliament Communications Office is involved in and does not reflect *all* digital engagement and innovation across the organisation. For example, we have expanded into other areas such as online education sessions and major events, which have become increasingly relevant post Covid. These services are led by other teams however and so are not discussed in this article.

BACKGROUND

The founding principles of the Scottish Parliament, when established in 1999, were that it should be accessible, open, responsive, and that it should develop procedures which would facilitate public participation. A bold commitment to involving the people of Scotland in the consideration and scrutiny of policy and legislation from the outset. We hit the ground running in this respect, with an extensive outreach and education programme, a website that made it easy for citizens to find and read what was happening, live webcasting and the world's first parliamentary public petitions system.

But the social and political landscape in Scotland has changed considerably since then. New technology and social media have revolutionised the way people communicate with each other, what they expect in terms of services from public bodies, and the kind of participation they feel entitled to. Whereas our digital channels were originally

about informing and educating, there is now a demand to use them for meaningful interactions. However, information sharing is still a key part of the engagement continuum. Information raises awareness, education increases understanding, communication keeps people up to date; all these are prerequisites to citizens confidently taking part in consultations or deliberative events.

The Commission for Parliamentary Reform, established by Ken MacIntosh, Presiding Officer in 2016, to review the effectiveness of the Parliament, noted that it had initially led the way in ensuring society had the opportunity to learn about the work of the Parliament and to get involved.[1] It cited several effective engagement activities by committees (e.g. fact-finding visits, deliberative events etc) that had proactively sought to involve people with lived experiences in their work. However, the number of these events had diminished over time, and indeed were later stalled entirely during the COVID pandemic.

Digital tools provide the opportunity to 'do' engagement work more quickly and cost efficiently. They allow us to reach a wider, younger, more diverse audience and overcome the barriers of geography and accessibility. Engaging with citizens on the channels they communicate on presents the Parliament as an open, modern, relevant, and accessible institution. While the Parliament's digital offering had evolved over time, and we were already using, for example, social media to target hard-to-reach groups and seek their views, the Commission's recommendations validated this approach and called for more innovation.

Language was also a recurring theme, with the Parliament's website coming in for criticism for its use of parliamentary terminology, and because the user required existing knowledge of the Parliament's structure and functions in order to be able to use it effectively. In an effort to be open and accessible we had effectively created an unwieldy website full of content people couldn't find or understand. The need to simplify our language was a precursor to us becoming more digitally inclusive.

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[1] Parliament of Scotland, Commission for Parliamentary Reform, *Report*, 20 June 2017. Accessed at: <https://parliamentaryreform.scot/>.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

While digital engagement offers great potential, it also comes with challenges. At the most basic level we need to ensure that digital is not the only way citizens can find out about and interact with us. A digital-*first* solution is not a digital-*only* solution; we need to make sure that we are not excluding people who are not online, for example older people, people with poor connectivity, or people on lower incomes who do not have ready access to devices.

We also need to make sure that the engagement we seek is relevant and matches a need; that it is integrated into parliamentary business and that there is an outcome. We want people to feel that something happens as a result of their feedback. The public's trust in both the institution and our processes are at risk if they feel that we are not listening.

It is therefore essential that digital engagement sits as part of a wider engagement strategy, so that our digital activity is planned alongside other engagement activities as part of an integrated campaign. At the outset of a campaign (such as a committee inquiry), we should be clear about its purpose and aims, and know what we need to find out and from whom. We should also know what we are hoping to do with what we get back, and set realistic and measurable targets so we are able to assess whether we achieved what we set out to.

In recognition of this, the Public Engagement Board (PEB) and the Public Engagement Group (PEG) were established in 2013. Although the Parliament had always prioritised public engagement, and this had often been collaborative in nature, the planning and reporting of activities had previously been led by individual offices. This was the first time that engagement had been formally recognised as a strategic priority that required a defined cross-office structure to deliver it through.

The current Public Engagement Strategy (PES) covers Session 6 (2021-26), with a key aim of increasing engagement with groups of people who are less likely to do so.[2] Our priorities are to develop a better understanding of what barriers there are to public engagement, developing partnerships and connecting communities, and building on the digital means we relied on during the pandemic to expand engagement

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[2] Parliament of Scotland, 'Public Engagement Strategy'. Accessed at <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/spcb/strategic-plans/public-engagement-strategy.pdf>.

opportunities. The importance of the need to continue to innovate and try new things with our digital channels and engagement tools is an important part of this.

One of the outcomes of the Commission for Parliamentary Reform's work in 2016 was the establishment of a dedicated Committee Engagement Unit (now the Participation and Communities Team – PACT), a team responsible for diversifying the groups and people the committees generally consulted with to include a wider spread of voices, people with lived experiences rather than experts in a particular field. It was recognised at the same time that our engagement methods also needed to change, and that communications and participation experts had as important a role in this as those immersed in the detail of a committee inquiry.

This resulted in more joined-up planning from the start of a campaign. While the unpredictable timetables that committees work to, and the lack of lead-in time, often hinders the planning process, the new collaborative approach at least ensured that committees were asking the key questions about who they needed to speak to and what they really needed to learn before launching a call for views. It also enabled us to think more carefully about how to reach our target audiences and devise comprehensive and integrated communication plans to support this. Social media and digital tools played an increasingly important part of this, giving us cost-effective ways of reaching specific targeted groups.

WEBSITE

As noted above, the Parliament trail-blazed in this area when first established and committed to publishing as much as possible long before freedom of information legislation stipulated this. We were one of the first parliaments to provide both a live webcasting service and a video archive, and our e-petitions system was unique in that every petition submitted was (and still is) considered by the Parliament regardless of the extent of its support. But for various reasons we did not capitalise on this head start and the website became something of a behemoth, a repository that was too big to be easily searchable, and without a content strategy or governance model that enabled us to manage content more effectively.

This was addressed in a recent change programme to replace the website as well as its technical infrastructure, but which also had content management at its heart. The starting point was our users and what they need, shifting from the previous position of the website being largely built around the structure of the organisation. Previously users had to have some prior knowledge of how the Parliament worked and who did what to be able to use it effectively. The findings from the Commission for

Parliamentary Reform also reinforced the need to change in this regard. Recognising the importance of informing and educating as enablers to participation, the website, as the primary and authoritative source of parliamentary information, simply had to be better.

The latest iteration of the website (which went live in 2021) is more accessible, stripped-back, and is structured based on what users told us during the extensive user-research phase of the programme.[3] Our content strategy mandates that content is written in a way that is easier to understand and more findable, and that content is only published because there is either a clear user need or we have a legal obligation to make it available. There are now significantly fewer people producing content, which makes it easier for the central team to oversee what is being published and focus on continual improvement.

Alongside the build of the main site a new petitions system was introduced which significantly simplified the user journey for a petitioner or a potential supporter. Enhanced clipping functionality on Parliament.tv was also introduced, making it much easier for users to pull clips of parliamentary footage for usage on their own channels.

But it remains a work in progress, as indeed all websites are. There is still work to be done to further embed content strategy across the organisation, but there are many examples of good content that has been co-produced between offices and content designers (such as Plain English Bill summaries), and the benefits this approach brings. We also have a roadmap for ongoing development of the site itself. Current priorities include improving search and web accessibility, making changes to some of the key content areas to respond to feedback already received. We proactively use analytics and continue to conduct research and user testing to inform our priorities.

SOCIAL MEDIA

We were quick to adopt social media as an easy and quick way of getting our messages across, updating people on parliamentary activity and news, and promoting the Parliament as a place to visit for events or exhibitions. While our channel content strategies have evolved over time, our overarching social media policy remains

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[3] Scottish Parliament, 'Homepage'. Accessed at <http://www.parliament.scot/>.

relatively unchanged. We use it to help us deliver the public engagement strategy by raising awareness, widening reach, targeting specific audiences, engage with audiences in the space they are already in, listening and gaining audience insight, marketing the Parliament as a place to visit, and promoting events and exhibitions.

The Parliament has had a presence on Twitter since 2011 and the main @scotparl account now has almost 170,000 followers. There are also several satellite accounts, including the majority of our committees. While we aim to be responsive on all of our channels, our Twitter accounts are more business focussed than others, and are more about amplification or sharing information to groups with specific interests. It is also where we do most of our social listening, using Hootsuite Enterprise to manage and coordinate our content across channels, as well as monitoring and responding.

We have had a Facebook page since 2012, which now has over 81,103 followers.[4] As the channels themselves change we have adapted our content strategies accordingly, but Facebook remains more of a generalist channel than our others. In the first phase of activity our content was mainly imagery, but over time we have made more use of video functionality, stories, reels etc. We started using Facebook to encourage public participation in committee consultations, producing more video and explainer content to bring the often dry calls for views to life. This worked well for consultations that covered issues pertinent to people's everyday lives – access to railway stations, parking laws, education standards and so on. Topics that everyone could contribute to without having to be an expert or understand complex terminology.

However, while Facebook Insights offer sophisticated analytics and reporting options, it was difficult to process comments efficiently. It is now more likely that we will use Facebook to point to online surveys (see digital tools below) with clear calls to action, and use targeting to reach specific audiences identified during the engagement planning.

We encourage interactions and welcome comments on our posts but this comes with the responsibility to moderate and manage effectively to make sure that people are complying with our rules of engagement (avoiding offensive language etc), and that

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[4] Scottish Parliament, 'Scottish Parliament Facebook Page'. Accessed at:
<https://www.facebook.com/scottishparliament>.

our own content remains impartial.[5] This often a challenge at politically charged times, so we also use Facebook's reporting mechanisms when required, also applying functionality such as turning off comments for specific posts.

We have had an Instagram account since 2016, initially to help us reach and engage with a younger audience.[6] Our strategy was to showcase the building and bring to life what it's like to come or work here. We successfully covered events and exhibitions, ran photo competitions, hosted 'insta-meets' and shared user generated content. Within 6 months we had gained over 2,000 followers, a figure which has now grown to almost 20,000. Following feedback from users we began to look at how we could use the channel to promote parliamentary business and encourage interaction, but with a 'behind the scenes' tone that helped humanise the institution somewhat. We now use stories and reels to complement our more 'business' focussed content elsewhere, although it remains the channel we use most for visitor marketing.

We have recently updated both our Facebook and Instagram strategies to reflect the new public engagement strategy, so are using more ads and targeting to reach the audiences that new strategy has prioritised (minority and ethnic groups, people with disabilities, younger people and those on lower incomes). This is a shift from trying to use the channels for the engagement itself; instead, the aim is to use the appropriate channel and format of content to match specific aims for specific audiences.

While Twitter advertising remains blocked to us as a 'government' or 'political' organisation, we have been restricted to purely organic content here, hence why these above efforts are more focussed on Facebook and Instagram. We have amplified ongoing business content that would have otherwise performed poorly in order to get it in front of more people or indeed fewer people but with specific interests.

An example is a recent inquiry on Ferry procurement, of particular interest to Island communities but much less so to the bulk of our audience which is based around Scotland's central belt.[7] We streamed a ferry-related committee meeting as a

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[5] Scottish Parliament, 'About the Scottish Parliament: Policies'. Accessed at: <https://www.parliament.scot/about/how-parliament-works/parliament-policies/online-discussion-rules#topOfNav>.

[6] Scottish Parliament, 'scotparl' Instagram Account. Accessed at: < https://www.instagram.com/scotparl/?hl=en>.

[7] Parliament of Scotland, 'Scottish Parliament Facebook Page – Videos', Accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/scottishparliament/videos/306071478316626/>.

Facebook Premiere, then used this as the basis of an advertisement that targeted island communities in the west coast up to Shetland and Harris, focused on those aged 18-48, interested in politics and public transport. The ad earned over 800 plays, 15,700 impressions directly attributable to the targeted community, 114 reactions, 22 shares and 91 comments. A subsequent campaign used copy tailored to two different island groups, and featured video clips of witnesses from those islands. Over 7 days, these ads earned a total of 556 link clicks to our digital consultation hub, and 59 shares.

As an example of content tailored to minority ethnic communities, we recently created a video, featuring a woman of south-Asian background who had addressed Parliament the previous year.[8] The purpose of this content was to demonstrate the relevance of the Parliament to this community which traditionally does not engage with us. We visited her in her parents' shop and filmed a video in which she discussed her identity and feelings about Parliament. We also included her mother in the piece, discussing her experience in moving to Scotland and her experience as an older person in relation to Parliament. The video ad was targeted in and around Edinburgh to Urdu and Punjabi speakers and earned 13,000 impressions and 288 clicks to our digital consultation hub

To further target those from different minority ethnic backgrounds we also ran ads in Polish and Urdu. For both ads we created an eye-catching graphic featuring Polish and Urdu text, and used Polish and Urdu copy in each respective ad. These ads were targeted at large Polish and Urdu-speaking communities around Glasgow and Aberdeen who were also identified as being interested in politics. These ads generated 371 clicks to our engagement platform, reached nearly 8000 people from those communities, and also generated 371 clicks to our engagement platform

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT TOOLS

Governments at various levels increasingly are using digital consultation tools to seek views on a range of public policy and service delivery issues. Parliaments need to keep up with this trend, or they risk becoming less relevant. If people can use platforms outside of parliament for civic engagement, and if they are quicker and easier to use

[8] Parliament of Scotland, 'Scottish Parliament Facebook Page – Videos', Accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/scottishparliament/videos/578720060314583/>.

than our established channels, then what is the incentive for citizens to get involved with us instead of, say, local government or community networks?

A recognition of the need to keep abreast of these developments, and diversify in our use of engagement tools, was behind the establishment of a Digital Engagement Tools Team (DETT) in 2018. Until then we were becoming more sophisticated in how we used our digital channels to raise awareness and point people to consultations, but we were still relying on people providing us with lengthy Word documents in terms of conversion. The purpose of DETT is to explore new opportunities for digital consultation, collaboration and co-production. The key idea was to trial low cost standalone digital tools for public engagement that could be tested quickly and easily. The group secured a modest budget which enabled us to procure and test 3 tools. One of these tools, Citizen Space, a survey-based consultation platform, is now the standard tool for committee calls for views.

Not only does this make it easier and quicker for people to respond to our calls for views (including the ability to submit videos), it is an effective way of focussing responses around the specific areas the committee wants to find out about. Its reporting functionality also saves significant time for researchers responsible for analysing and summarising these responses. For high profile inquiries, such as the recent Coronavirus (Recovery and Reform) (Scotland) Bill 2022, committees are able to take dual approaches, creating short surveys that allow most members of the public to share their overall opinion on a subject, while also undertaking a more formal consultation which allows experts to have the space to share their views. With this Bill we received nearly 4,000 responses to the survey, giving a view of the public's perspective, and nearly 100 detailed responses.[9] Combining these into one consultation would have discouraged many people from taking part.

We also use a tool called Your Priorities; members of the public can submit ideas on a given topic, or be given pre-prepared ideas, such as sections of a Bill. Users can then discuss and prioritise these ideas. This helps committees assess the significance of ideas proposed and discussed, see the key issues the public think committees should consider, and discover key themes based on the experiences of participants. The use

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[9] See Parliament of Scotland, COVID-19 Recovery Committee, *Coronavirus (Recovery and Reform) (Scotland) Bill - Stage 1 scrutiny - Paper 1 - Note by the Clerk*, CVDR/S6/22/11/1, 31 March 2022. Accessed at <https://www.parliament.scot/~/media/committ/2952>.

of this tool has so far enhanced committee work including business planning, inquiry development, generating questions and experiences to support direct questioning of ministers and officials, scrutiny of legislation, scrutiny of government policy and delivery; and seeking feedback from the public and stakeholders on the content of committee reports.

There has been a positive reaction from Members of Parliament to the use of both tools, who are pleased to be hearing from members of the public in this constructive manner. The Team is currently investigating video submission tools to make it easier for the deaf community to respond to consultations using British Sign Language. DETT proactively reviews the digital landscape on a regular basis to identify further opportunities to improve our digital participation capacity.

All trials undertaken to date have tested the various tools against different types of consultation, and different target audiences. Feedback from participants is a key factor in our consideration of whether a new tool adds value. Any new tool procured has to offer something new or better than what we are already using. The inquiries we use these tools for continue to be supported by our other digital channels. These have added substantial value to committee engagement work and were crucial tools for enabling us to sustain public engagement for committees during the COVID pandemic. But we expect this approach to remain in place and are hopeful that they will accelerate the pace of digital transformation.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY

The Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, which has broadened its remit beyond dealing with petitions this Session, recently launched an inquiry into public participation, and is looking at if and how people's voices are heard as part of the Parliament's scrutiny role. This is an important inquiry in that it has been driven by members of the committee, who recognise the importance of effective public engagement. It is a good example of how we have used a combination of digital and face to face methods to hear from different people and explore some of the issues in more depth.

The Committee ran two different online surveys - a short survey aimed to find out about the people who have or have not been involved in the Scottish Parliament's work, and their experiences, and a longer survey asking people to share their views on what can be done to improve public participation in more detail. We built on the examples above on using different languages to target specific communities and created a Facebook advertising campaign featuring video and images to target Urdu

and Polish speakers. We targeted the Polish content at Polish speakers in and around Aberdeenshire who were interested in politics, and replicated this for Urdu speakers, with those interested in politics in and around Glasgow. These advertisements generated 371 clicks to our engagement platform and reached nearly 8000 people from those communities.

In total there were 340 survey responses. The Committee also held 10 focus group sessions, involving 119 people, which gave them a chance to share their views directly with politicians. These groups were selected to ensure there was representation from people less likely to get involved in the Parliament's work, including minority ethnic groups, people living on a low income and disabled people. They were facilitated by organisations and groups who actively work with such people.

One of the findings, perhaps unsurprisingly, was that the majority people who praised our engagement work were people who were already actively engaged, and had direct experience of, for example, submitting views to a committee inquiry. Others said that they didn't know how to get involved and found it difficult to find out what consultations were underway on the website. The website also came under criticism for not promoting outreach work and showcasing examples of successful engagement activities. Language and accessibility came up frequently - the need to be clearer about what we are asking from people and what the outcomes may be, as well as the ability to provide evidence in different formats, such as video or audio.

This inquiry is still ongoing however the findings so far support the Parliament's direction of travel in terms of the new engagement strategy, and a commitment to working across offices, and with external partners, to deliver an appropriate blend of on and offline engagement activities based on need. It is clear that, in particular, the Participation and Communities Team (PACT) and the Parliament Communications Office (which includes the Digital Communications and Content Team) need to work closely together to bring these together. This is from the planning, promotion and recruitment right through to evaluation.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR MEMBERS

A final point is that for many people the Parliament is made up of the politicians they vote for, and they expect them to represent their interests and address their concerns. Their experience with engaging with the Parliament will be entirely through their Members – through surgeries or direct communications. It is therefore important to recognise the important ongoing role Members have in helping foster a positive engagement culture. This is both individually, the way in which they engage with

people in their local area or region, and collectively, through parliamentary processes and structures**.** It includes both what they do to *contribute* to planned parliamentary engagement activities (such as helping to promote a committee consultation or taking part in a fact-finding visit), and how they *respond* to what they have found out as a result of the activity (ensuring that the activity is meaningful because there is some sort of outcome, and people feel they have been listened to).

Members have to be aware of and have bought in to our engagement strategy for it to be truly effective. This requires educating and informing Members and their support staff about good practice approaches, particularly when they are newly elected. This something that the Public Engagement Group is considering how to address.

Meanwhile, for the last couple of years, we have been more proactive in providing Members with training on how to use social media, how to stay safe online, and how to get the best out of video. This has involved semi regular drop-in sessions with input from Facebook and Twitter representatives, as well as Police Scotland. The focus of these sessions is on how Members can secure their accounts, what they can do to manage their interactions, and what channels are available to them should they get in to trouble, how to report incidents and knowing when to escalate.

We have also run training sessions on how to get the best out of social media, which includes setting up pages, managing and planning content, and any new features from the channels which we feel would be of interest. These are mainly on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, but as the sessions are interactive we try and answer any questions they have on any others. The sessions are open to both Members and their staff and are now an important part of induction for new Members following an election.