

Scottish Women's Convention
response to the Scottish
Government's consultation on:

Democracy Matters



February 2024

Premise

In 2018, 'Democracy Matters' discussions were carried out across Scotland, with more than 4,000 people being consulted on their views. The Scottish Government asked individuals to explain how they were involved in local decision-making processes and whether they would like their local community to have increased control over decisions that impact them. Following on from these conversations, the below consultation document was released, to further assess how different locales experience decision-making and how this could be altered across Scotland.

After the Scottish Government has received consultation responses, they shall consider alterations that are required and rectify their plan accordingly – incorporating suggestions made.



The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)

The SWC is funded to engage with women across Scotland to ensure that their views are represented in policy and decision-making processes. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of parliamentary, governmental, and organisational consultation papers at Scottish, UK and international levels.

The SWC gathers information using different methods, including roadshows, thematic conferences, surveys, and both in-person and online roundtable events. This submission presents the views of a range of women, reflecting their opinions, ideas and lived experience. Working together with many other equalities organisations and community groups, we use our broad network to ensure that women from a range of backgrounds are heard and acknowledged. We are continually reviewing innovative ways of engaging with women and developing our trauma-informed and culturally sensitive practice to support vital contributions from as many women as possible.

Representation

When thinking about who might be part of new decision-making bodies, what are the best ways to ensure they truly reflect their communities and enhance equality?

Ensuring meaningful representation across decision-making processes is vital in the creation of a system which works for the majority of citizens. Traditionally, organisations have been led by white, heterosexual men, with their needs being prioritised over others. This has led to continued disadvantage for women and minority groups, and therefore, increasing diversity across decision-making bodies is key. To do this effectively, minority groups must be approached directly, with a focus to repair relationships between them and institutions. Damage to this relationship has been caused by systemic maltreatment across the board, with BME women in particular explaining that they are often approached for views, however, see little change as a result of their input, leading to participatory fatigue. These women have also felt that their representation within decision-making bodies can be tokenistic, with their views dismissed. To combat this, all members should receive good quality training, focusing on cultural differences and effective communication. We also recommend general skills training, to ensure all participants feel confident to express their views and are empowered to effectively participate.

- “And I think, like my colleagues, they say that we are the ethnic minority, we are just fed-up, we’re over-researched.”
- “...when we’re invited, we’re not looking for the proverbial wobbly seat, where we spend all of our time adjusting the seat and the meeting passes us by. We want to be there the whole time because we have experiences just like everybody else. I’m tired of when I’m invited to a place, and even when you try and speak, it’s almost like people don’t see you.”
- “There will hopefully be a diverse group of women at the helm of politics, and the token women of colour will have gone. In 20 years, I won’t be here, but I hope my granddaughter and great-grandchildren will not have to face the difficulties we have had to.”

Furthermore, to ensure proper representation of women, we would encourage the utilisation of 50/50 gender split mechanisms. The ‘Women 50:50’ campaign aimed to establish 50% of the Scottish Parliament to be made up of women, with only two Scottish parties, the Scottish Green Party and Scottish National Party, having over 50% women MSPs. Through a clear target, decision-making bodies can ensure that women are included, ideally leading to cultural change.

What would the role of local elected representatives be?

The key role of local elected representatives would be demonstrating the needs of their local community at decision-making forums, ensuring that all groups are listened to and heard. As stated within the document, ‘seldom heard groups’ are often missed during consultative phases, and so, significant efforts must be made to include these viewpoints. However, ethnic minority women have also raised that this must carry out into action, proposing that participatory processes should include effective evaluation, as well as the creation, of policy. Therefore, we would recommend continued engagement with minority groups throughout the full process, alongside the specific embedding of anti-racist values.

- “...how are you evaluating it [Anti-Racist Charter]? Anyone can sign up to that...but how are you demonstrating your commitment to anti-racism.”

What would incentivise other people to take on/be part of decision making?

Women face misogyny across their lives, acting as a significant barrier to public engagement. Moves within the Scottish Government to tackle the issue of misogyny, such as the recently proposed Misogyny Law, may reduce the number of misogynistic harassment situations. However, during the SWC's 2023 misogyny project, women concluded that large-scale cultural change must occur to tackle misogyny¹. Having more women in decision-making positions across communities may assist in this mission, with the new law acting as a level of protection for women who bravely take on public positions. We therefore recommend the utilisation of the new Misogyny Law within a quick timescale to enable cultural change in Scotland.

- “If they [misogynists] know that there's something in place. Look at the racism law, you just know not to call people certain things now, because apart from getting into trouble professionally, there's a legal aspect to it, it's just an addition”
- “...laws will stop some behaviours, but they won't change attitudes, and that's where the cultural thing absolutely has to happen, and it has to be from a very, very young age”

Accountability and Participation

What do you think are the best ways to ensure new decision-making bodies are accountable to their community?

Participatory action processes would enable democratic participation through real-world problem solving by local stakeholders who may lack formal research training. Embedding this methodology into decision-making would enable higher levels of accountability, with community members heavily involved and trained to contribute. Those leading this process, must ensure that intragroup dynamics are considered, empowering all participants to engage. Furthermore, this must be a continuous process, with initial enthusiasm being carried on throughout. Therefore, we recommend the utilisation of participatory action principles across the new decision-making bodies, with a particular focus on the merit of lived experience.

Are community events a good way to involve local people in scrutinising progress and settling future direction?

Community events can provide a good platform in which local people can provide feedback on policy progress/planning. However, due to the sustained economic withdrawal seen across communities in Scotland, an issue further compounded by the current cost of living crisis, local services have been stripped and removed. Community centres and venues have been closed due to consistent budget cuts, having a significant impact on the stability of neighbourhoods. Therefore, organising good quality community feedback sessions has been made more complex, with some women across Scotland feeling a sense of disenfranchisement and loss of identity as community hubs continue to close.

¹ The Scottish Women's Convention. (2023). Misogyny in Scotland. Available at: <https://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/resources/misogyny-report-june-2023-final.pdf>

- “...they need to fund it [community projects], because without funding, you can't bring people together. And that's one way to get to know each other...We need those kind of activities and events”
- “...we have different communities in [URBAN LOCATION] where the community places have been stripped out of them. We've taken the community away and not replaced it with anything, the community centres that were there as well”
- “...there are no social amenities for families or general community, no recreational space, which erodes community cohesion as there are no opportunities for the community to gather”

However, women who reside in rural communities continue to state that they experience good levels of community cohesiveness, with this being highly influenced by women. They have explained that women often run community projects, including food banks, community halls and volunteering activities. Yet, despite a strong sense of local identity, rural women are likely to feel unheard or left behind in policy direction, evidencing that community events alone will not adequately provide an effective scrutiny process. Instead, good quality engagement with both decision-makers and communities must occur to enable effective communication. Therefore, we recommend a sustained commitment from local and national governments, to work alongside communities in decision-making.

- “I would say that [RURAL LOCATION] is a very good community...If there's one issue that needs fixing, people will come together for it.”
- “But I mean the community itself is very vibrant, it's always had to be like that because we don't get everything handed to us on a plate.”
- “I mean we've brought issues to the highest level of the Scottish Government...we just don't feel like they're listening.”

What other mechanisms would help achieve high levels of community participation in local decision-making processes?

Increased funding is vital to achieve high levels of community participation, with reinvestment in community centres being key. Through the reestablishment of social hubs, community cohesiveness and identity can be reaffirmed, while simultaneously creating a positive environment to hold debates and discussions. We would also recommend continued cooperation with decision-makers, ensuring that the wants and needs of communities are taken seriously.

Nurturing Community Capacities

What types of support might communities need to build capacity?

Financial support will be vital in building capacity. As has been stated, community venues have been closing consistently due to increased running costs. Without a sustained funding model, the plans proposed within this consultation will have little impact and lack longevity. Women have explained that current unstable funding structures have contributed to the reduction in local services and have therefore made repeated calls for a review of funding-related decision-making.

- “All the services you relied on had their funding cut, so they couldn't afford to keep supporting you.”

- “For us as a centre and the sector, it’s about funding and staff retention. We’re constantly on these short-term funding cycles...We’re constantly fighting for funding, applying for funding, or writing funding reports”

Furthermore, specialist training is required to increase capacity for a positive, participative process. Without such training, delivered by experts, it is unlikely that the suggested initiatives will be successful. This guidance must be carried out with both decision-makers and community members, increasing equality and combatting potential unbalanced power dynamics. The training is also vital in ensuring an anti-racist approach is taken throughout and all groups are empowered to give their views.

Anything Else?

When sending your views, please also tell us about anything else you think is important for us to know at this stage?

As alluded to above, there are significant differences across communities in Scotland. Those residing in rural areas have expressed a feeling of being forgotten and are often missed throughout the decision-making process. They have also stated that due to increased centralisation, decisions are often made with cities in mind, ignoring the unique challenges facing rural locales. Equity between regions is vital, and as such we would like to see a commitment from the Scottish Government to ensure that this value is enshrined in future policy decisions on democratic participation.

Conclusion

Having listened to women, our three key recommendations on this topic are:

- Ensure meaningful representation across decision-making processes, through good quality diversity and inclusion training for all relevant parties.
- We would encourage the utilisation of 50/50 gender split mechanisms, to safeguard women's representation.
- Reinvigorate community spaces through increased funding, allowing for improved community participation across decision-making.

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government's consultation on '**Democracy Matters**'. As an organisation, we will continue to work with women from across Scotland to gather voices and experiences relating to this topic and its effects on women's equality.

For further information or to share your views, please contact:

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