

IMPROVING VISITOR EXPERIENCE AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Executive summary

1. This paper is for information and updates the SPCB on the work which has been, and will be, taking place to further enhance the visitor experience at Holyrood; improve visitor numbers and ultimately increase public knowledge of and engagement with the Parliament in line with our Public Engagement Strategy.

Issues

2. There are two aims to the Public Engagement Strategy. Firstly, effective public participation in the work of the Parliament and, secondly, increased awareness of the relevance and accessibility of the Parliament, particularly in under-represented groups.

3. Much of the focus recently has been on the first aim, principally as a result of the Commission on Parliamentary Reform. A Committee Engagement Unit was established in response. The new team is working with existing teams to support committees in improving their digital and deliberative engagement work. For example, the first citizen's jury was run by the Environment and Climate Change Committee in March with the Health and Sport Committee in the final stages of preparations for a citizen's jury in April/May.

4. The focus of this paper is to update the Corporate Body on progress in respect of the second aim – which has perhaps been less high profile than the participation agenda – and specifically the visitor experience at Holyrood. This is directly relevant to one of the aims of the parliamentary service, as a whole: “encourage public involvement in our work through welcoming facilities and inclusive services”.

5. In terms of visitors, while there has been fluctuation in numbers over the years from 2011, there has been a steady year-on-year decline of 5.2% on average.

6. Given the strong emphasis the Parliament places on openness and engagement, work began in 2016 to address this decline and to provide more opportunities for the people of Scotland to engage with us. This work has three main linked strands: improving the overall visitor experience; improved promotion of the Parliament as an open and interesting destination; and providing additional opportunities for the public to engage with us in person and online. Further details on each of these stands is set out below.

Improved Visitor Experience

7. People have many demands on their limited free time therefore it is not enough for the Parliament to simply state that it is open to visitors, it must also provide an attractive proposition to provide that real incentive to visit. Those that are here for business reasons (to give evidence to a committee for example) already have that incentive. However, the majority of people will never want or need that level of in-depth engagement with us. What they do need, is to know that the Parliament is there for them; is open and accessible; and that they can access their MSPs whenever they need to. That general broad understanding of the Parliament is an important part of a healthy democracy and helps ensure the Parliament remains at the heart of Scottish public life.

8. The visitor experience starts outside the building by providing a clear and obvious invitation to come in. We have therefore made improvements to the signage and advertising on the exterior of the building, making it clearer not only where the public entrance is but what you can experience inside – in particular we have emphasised our range of free public tours, our shop and café and our visitor creche for young families.

9. In addition, further improvements have been made to the Main Hall which is the arrival point for visitors. This includes a staffed welcome desk/cube that engages the visitor on arrival in the Main Hall providing information and directing them accordingly.

10. This and related work to provide a more welcoming environment culminated in the Scottish Parliament achieving VisitScotland's 5-star award in September last year.

11. This is VisitScotland's highest accolade and signifies exceptional customer service and high-quality facilities. This logo now features on our visitor leaflet and exterior advertising and is a brand which, in the public mind, is associated with an attractive day out.

12. Building on this, we are currently redesigning the exhibition space in the Main Hall. One of the weaknesses in our current offering has been a comparative lack of information about the work of the Parliament, in terms of how the decisions made at Holyrood affect the daily lives of Scots. As part of the 20th anniversary programme, we are taking the opportunity to create a new engaging and educational exhibition for the Main Hall.

13. This exhibition is being designed and introduced over the next few years. The first sections will showcase key legislation over the past 20 years through a number of case studies and will feature a welcome section exploring the symbolism of the Parliament's mace. Later this year we will introduce exhibits that educates visitors about parliamentary business including what happens in the Chamber, the current work of committees and the petitions process. Over the next few years, we will introduce sections on the role of MSPs; devolved powers and a future parliament section.

Improved Promotion

14. As well as improving the information on the exterior of the building we have also – for the first time – undertaken a campaign to promote the Parliament as a legislature. All previous advertising and promotion had focused on specific events and exhibitions such as the World Press Photography Exhibition or the Festival of Politics. The focus of this campaign has been to drive up visitor numbers; increase public tour uptake; and increase traffic to the Parliament’s websites. As well as digital and traditional promotion we have also sought to raise the Parliament’s profile through:

- engagement with VisitScotland who can promote the Parliament to their clients;
- engagement with local hoteliers whose businesses are based on their proximity to attractions such as the Parliament;
- the addition of our visit leaflet to the bags of all visiting schoolchildren;
- the distribution of leaflets to MSPs local offices; and
- engagement with new and diverse groups such as Instagrammers through specific events such as “Instameets” designed for them.

Additional Opportunities to Engage

15. In the first year of the campaign we successfully arrested the decline in visitor numbers, showing a 0.04% increase in visitors and in the second year (2018/19) there has been a 5.8% increase in visitor numbers.

16. Tour capacity also went up from 74% to over 100% (with additional tours being run to meet demand) and traffic to the Parliament’s Visit Website increasing by an average of 40%. The increase in tour capacity in particular is encouraging, as it is through this medium that people learn more about the Parliament, the work of MSPs, and how they can engage with us in future.

17. Work has also progressed as part of this overall initiative to increase the opportunities for the public to engage with us in person and online. Aside from an increase in the take up of public tours and visits to the VisitParliament Website, this work stream has also included:

- a significantly shortened visitor survey and additional iPads in the Main Hall to encourage survey completion which has driven up returns;
- the opportunity in that survey to sign up to receive additional information about Parliamentary business, events and exhibitions on an ongoing basis;
- the addition of an online survey link to our shop and café receipts to prompt feedback;
- the piloting of a new Photography Tour to complement our existing history, art and architecture
- the piloting of a series of weekend family days during 2019; and

- the launch of a new 360-degree, virtual reality tour of Holyrood which can be accessed from anywhere.

18. Looking ahead, we want to do further analysis on visitor numbers to inform how we promote the Parliament and further develop the visitor experience.

Resource Implications

19. There are no resource implications. All of the work set out above has been carried out within existing office resources. This has been possible because of the phased and incremental approach taken.

Governance issues

20. This work is overseen by the Parliament's Public Engagement Board and directed by its Public Engagement Strategy.

Publication Scheme

21. This paper can be published.

Decision

22. No decisions are sought, this paper is for information only.

Callum Thomson
Chair, Public Engagement Board

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