Scottish Older People’s Assembly – written evidence (CCE0212)

1. What does citizenship and civic engagement mean in the 21st century? Why does it matter, and how does it relate to questions of identity?

The Scottish Older People’s Assembly’s particular interest is in ensuring that older people are enabled to influence the policies and services that affect them. This presents a challenge as retired people often are more isolated from other members of the community and less adept at accessing and responding to digital means of communication. Older people are often portrayed as a burden on the community. There is a need to overcome that and create a situation in which their experience and lives are seen to be valued.

We have set out some proposals below which we would be pleased to present personally. The aim of these being to identify new ways of building bridges within and between communities, and to support civic engagement. How to think about citizenship and civic engagement in a more vibrant, positive and integrated manner is of particular interest to the committee.

4. Do current laws encourage active political engagement?

Lack of confidence in the effectiveness of the political system is probably not so much a matter of laws as attitudes and behaviour of politicians. There is a tendency for politicians to believe that their only function is to operate within the parliamentary (or council) bubbles.

Public perception of the government is coloured by the adversarial nature of the Party system. If one says black the other feels obliged to say white. It is probably inevitable in our election process, but it gives the impression that inter-party point scoring over-rides the commitment to working together for the common good of citizens. Improving appropriate public participation in policy formation and implementation would help to improve that. There are many non-political representative groups who could be involved in relevant parliamentary discussions to help keep them objective.

We too often have the impression that citizens and their representatives are seen as a nuisance or distraction from the business of the Parliaments, councils and public bodies and that contact is quite grudgingly allocated to meetings with them. We appreciate that elected representatives have jobs to do but nevertheless they should understand that their prime function is to represent all of the people and not just their own parties. They should make an effort to prioritise their contact with the public.

7. How can society support civic engagement? What responsibility should central government, devolved and local governments, third sector organisations and the individual have for encouraging civic engagement? What can the Government and Parliament do to support civil society initiatives to increase civic engagement?

Our experience is that the Scottish Parliament and government are more open to contact with the public than Westminster. We appreciate that. While we believe it is well
intentioned our experience is that interaction with the public and representative bodies is often not as productive as it might be.

For example, public access to Cross Party Groups is welcome, but very few MSPs attend and then often only briefly. Too often the meetings become just a series of reports from the various public groups. That is useful in networking and disseminating knowledge, but there is usually no impression that the MSPs will take the issues forward to government for consideration or action. There should be a more systematic procedure of reporting which MSPs will progress particular issues - perhaps in conjunction with the body that raised them - and a commitment that they will report back on whether policies or suggestions will be adopted or implemented.

9. Why do so many communities and groups feel "left behind"? Are there any specific factors which act as barriers to active citizenship faced by different communities or groups - white, BME, young, old, rural, urban? How might these barriers be overcome?

The proportion of older people in the population is steadily increasing. Yet all too often the social benefits of longevity are portrayed negatively as a problem, rather than as an achievement to be celebrated. Older people are regularly exposed to that. There is a need to build confidence in the contribution positive benefits older people bring to society.

12. Can you give examples of initiatives and role models that have helped promote a positive vision of British Citizenship within a tolerant and cohesive society?

We believe that the Scottish Older People’s Assembly has helped to overcome some of the above challenges in Scotland. Our approach has been to hold regular consultative meetings with a wide range of older people all over Scotland inviting them to express their concerns and their proposals for improvement of existing, or suggestions for new services and policies. We then act as their voice in relaying their views to Ministers and officials of the Scottish and to a lesser extent, UK governments. We believe that is an approach which should be developed and encouraged.

More background about SOPA and our activities follows:

The Scottish Older People’s Assembly (SOPA) was formed in 2009 and became a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation in April 2016. It is led by older people, comprising 25-member organisations representing around 36,500 older citizens across Scotland. Our purposes are the improvement of human rights, the interests of older people, the equality and diversity of older people and citizenship and community development for older people. We influence decision makers on legislation, policies and services applying to older people and hold an annual national Assembly in the Debating Chamber of the Scottish Parliament enabling direct contact between older people and politicians. Please see our website for background information at www.scotopa.org.uk As a result of this exchange older people become aware of Scotland's democratic system, how policies and legislation are developed and how services are implemented.

Since April 2016 more than 900 people have participated in 21 SOPA meetings around Scotland, two Scottish Parliamentary receptions, one Westminster reception and one
national Assembly. The morning session of the Assembly, held in November 2016 was chaired by the Parliamentary Presiding Officer Ken Macintosh and Alex Cole-Hamilton MSP chaired the afternoon session. Keynote speeches were given by the Minister for Social Security, the Chairperson of SOPA and 13 older people who represented member organisations. The afternoon session dealt with preventative issues and a dialogue between politicians and officials was hosted by Alex Cole-Hamilton MSP. 160 delegates attended the Assembly involving 67 different organisations from a wide range of equality groups. The majority were from the Central Belt, but Dumfries and Galloway, Scottish Borders, Grampian, Orkney and West of Scotland were represented. We delivered a report on the Assembly and presented it to the Scottish Government. See our December newsletter for details. [http://www.scotopa.org.uk/2016assembly.asp](http://www.scotopa.org.uk/2016assembly.asp)

Efficient maintenance of our website and social media which includes all of our events and activities has doubled and boosted reaches and engagement with older people and stakeholders over the internet.

A post-assembly letter to the SOPA Coordinator from Jean Freeman MSP, Minister for Social Security stated “I congratulate you and your colleagues on what you have accomplished during the past year to advance equality for older people and for arranging such a successful event.”

The Westminster reception was hosted by Mhairi Black MP early in 2017 and dealt with the anomalies and negative effects within the current pension system, particularly those linked to WASPI. Christine Graham MSP hosted the Scottish Parliament reception that celebrated older people’s contribution to democracy and how discrimination towards the older LGBTi community disadvantages them. Trading Standards Scotland in Partnership with SOPA delivered a third reception hosted by Alex Cole-Hamilton MSP. This event singled out some of the issues raised during the national Assembly relating to Scotland’s National Outcome - "We live our lives safe from crime, disorder and danger". Mr Cole-Hamilton said: “This was one of the most enjoyable events I’ve had the pleasure to host. I think we should make it an annual event. What do you say?!”

"Our strength as active citizens derives from the participation of our member organisations. We are pleased that has been recognised in the public and political sphere. Holyrood Magazine which organises prestigious conferences, now routinely invites older people from SOPA to participate, when older people’s issues are being discussed. Recently 4 representatives of our membership organisations formed the panel of their conference on isolation and recounted the experience of their members. When Archie Noone, SOPA and Alzheimers Scotland Dementia Working Group spoke at the Holyrood conference on “Supporting an Ageing Workforce” about his personal experience of dementia, he demonstrated that it does not prevent someone from good humouredly chairing a conference.” Tom Berney, SOPA Chair

In addition to the compliments above, and following our 2015 Assembly 25 MSPs put forward a motion to state support for SOPA and congratulate us on being short listed for a Glasgow Herald Award.