**Quakers in Scotland Parliamentary Engagement 2023**

Dear Friends,

Having spoken at various area meetings in these first few months of 2024, I wanted to share on the website a round-up of the work that the Parliamentary Engagement Working Group (PEWG) and I undertook on your behalf in 2023.

After joining in July 2023, I have been encouraged by all that Friends in Scotland are doing to have a kinder voice heard amidst (what can often be) heated voices in a parliamentary context. Keeping to the priorities agreed by general meeting last year has allowed us to be focused, and adapt to opportunities when these arise.

Overall, my impressions from my first months as Parliamentary Engagement Officer have been that there are a lot of encouraging statements coming from the Scottish government and wider parliament. We have been able to build on a lot of that, and contribute a distinct Quaker perspective. The key will be to keep maintaining this engagement, together with our coalition partners, and to support the government on a track which leads to delivery of the positive aims it has.

As mentioned at Area Meetings and General Meeting in November, I have started an occasional mailing list for those who would like to be kept abreast of opportunities which arise for engaging with our representatives in relation to our identified parliamentary priorities. It is so encouraging to see this being shared and people taking action as a result – I love to hear from you about how you’re engaging with parliamentarians. If you’re not yet on the ‘parliamentary engagement opportunities’ email list and would like to be, please do email me at [sarahk@quaker.org.uk](mailto:sarahk@quaker.org.uk) and I’ll add you.

**Peacebuilding**

Scottish Peace Institute

In its 21/22 programme for government, the Scottish government announced its intention to establish a Scottish Peace Institute by the end of 2022. Andrew Tomlinson, the previous Parliamentary Engagement Officer, undertook a lot of engagement work in 2022 in relation to an independent report that was being made considering this initiative.

However, the Peace Institute seemed to drop off the political agenda, and didn’t feature in the 23/24 programme for government. The independent report wasn’t published until late in December 2023, in redacted form and in response to an FOI request. On pursuing the issue with a government minister we understand that current budget pressures mean that the peace institute has been deprioritised, though the government still hopes to progress this later in the parliamentary term. We will continue to try to engage with the government and opposition parties on this issue, working with Christian Aid who also have an interest in the issue.

Peace education

In May 2022 colleagues in Quakers in Britain launched the [Peace at the Heart](https://www.quaker.org.uk/documents/peace-at-the-heart) report on the state of, and case for, peace education in Britain. Building on the work that had been done promoting this report to MSPs in 2022, I worked with members of PEWG and colleagues from Quakers in Britain, together with Friend Mary Troup, to put on an [event](https://www.quakerscotland.org/our-work/parliamentary-engagement/news/wangaris-trees-peace-flourish-scottish-parliament) and [exhibition](https://www.quakerscotland.org/our-work/parliamentary-engagement/news/peace-heart-exhibition-scottish-parliament) in Parliament.

Friends throughout Scotland helped by emailing MSPs to encourage them to take part. We welcomed 10 MSPs during the ‘Wangari’s Trees’ performance and then interacted with a further 20 or so over the course of our exhibition the following week, including First Minister Humza Yousaf who took the report away to consider.

Following these events I was able to meet a number of MSPs to discuss peace education and other Quaker priorities. One MSP connected me with Scottish government officials responsible for creating a portal of materials for schools to use in their Learning for Sustainability lessons, and we have sent on Quakers in Britain’s peace education resources to be featured there.

Ellis Brooks and Izzy Cartwright from the Peace Education team at Quakers in Britain created the exhibition and are building strong connections in Scotland, boosted by the events and a networking meeting held in Edinburgh Central Meeting House. In particular, Ellis has done follow-on training for the Educational Institute for Scotland (EIS); and has participated in the IDEAS international development group for advocacy on global citizenship and peace education in Scotland.

**Human rights**

Children’s rights

On behalf of General Meeting for Scotland, the PEWG remains a member of Together Scotland, a coalition an alliance of charities concerned about children’s rights in Scotland. As many of you will know, through Together, we campaigned for the incorporation of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child into Scots law, and a Bill to this effect was unanimously passed in 2021. However, this was subsequently subject to a legal challenge by the UK government, who had concerns that it would place duties on UK Ministers and would therefore be outside the competence of the Scottish parliament.

The Supreme Court ruled in the UK government’s favour, and in the course of 2023 Together were working with Scottish ministers to amend the Bill so that it can be introduced while not falling foul of further legal challenge. This has now come to pass, with the Bill receiving Royal Assent in January 2024.

Human rights

As the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) Bill progressed, the Scottish government also consulted on the introduction of a Human Rights (Scotland) Bill. This was a big consultation, and I worked with members of the PEWG and the Community Justice Working Group on our response. We were supported with materials from our coalition partners Stop Climate Chaos Scotland (SCCS) and the Environmental Rights Centre for Scotland (ERCS).

An independent analysis of the consultation responses has now been published and this picked up many themes that we proposed in our response, including:

* Support for the courts using ‘human dignity’ when considering human rights – and that this should be required (not only ‘allowed’).
* Support for including all of the human rights treaties to be included in the right to comply for public bodies.
* Desire to include adequate sanitation and healthy, sustainably produced food under the right to a healthy environment.
* Embedding the Human Rights Act 1998 into the Bill framework; and including LGBTI+ and older people as groups explicitly covered in the equality provision of the Bill.
* The need for Scottish government guidance and support to duty-bearers; and to provide adequate funding, resourcing, and training for scrutiny bodies.

We anticipate that the Human Rights Bill will be presented in May to June and will scrutinise it to see how these responses have been taken into account in the drafting.

**Climate and economic justice**

Speaking out for truth and integrity

I have continued to be an active member of the political advocacy group in Stop Climate Chaos Scotland’s (SCCS). This has included attending a roundtable with Scottish government officials on hydrogen and net zero emissions technologies. It was interesting to see that SCCS particularly valued the voice of Quakers in this meeting – although it was on a technical matter, they felt it was important to have people speaking from a layperson’s perspective and particularly in relation to the importance of truth and integrity when considering the prospects of hydrogen playing a major part in Scotland’s energy policy.

COP28 interfaith vigil

Working with Christian Aid, Quakers in Scotland contributed to holding an interfaith silent vigil during the (very rainy!) Global Day of Action around COP28 in December. It was heartening to see Scotland’s work on the loss and damage fund being recognised and built upon, with the UK government now having pledged £60 million to go into the international fund. However, the scale of the money now pledged remains far short of what is needed to support the countries who have been affected to date by the climate crisis, so work remains to be done on this.

Land reform

Matters have slowed slightly in terms of the Scottish government’s focus on land reform. Members of PEWG spoke to researchers from the James Hutton Institute about Quakers’ attitudes towards land use across Scotland as part of the Scottish Government’s Strategic Research Programme. Michael Hutchinson, on behalf of General Meeting for Scotland, also signed in support of the John Muir Trust’s call for an effective Carbon Land Tax.

**Times for Reflection**

As part of Quaker witness, individual Quakers have the opportunity to offer a Time for Reflection to open the Scottish Parliament. Contributions are sought from different faith groups (and those of no faith), and it is a nice way to interact with MSPs and provide them some food for thought as they start the business in the Chamber each week. Last year, Friend Lesley Morrison gave a talk on the theme ‘[Are we good Ancestors?](https://quakerscotland.org/our-work/parliamentary-engagement/news/quaker-time-reflection-scottish-parliament-april-2023)’ in April; and Friend Martin Mansell offered some words on ‘[What is peace?](https://www.quakerscotland.org/our-work/parliamentary-engagement/news/quaker-time-reflection-what-peace-28-november-2023)’ in November. More are in the pipeline.

This work gives me – and I hope, all of us, a wonderful insight into the work of, and the pressures on, our MSPs and government. The PEWG and I work on our behalf on the priorities agreed by you through GM discernment. The Group currently includes: Richard Raggett and Carolyn Burch (NSAM; Co-Convenors), Ed Tyler and Pete Clarke (WSAM), Cath Dyer and Carol Jennings (SESAM), and Tanya Jones (ESAM). If you would like to find out more about how we work and what we are doing, please get in touch with us. Click [here](https://www.quakerscotland.org/documents/468) for copies of our consultation responses, statements and information about our other work.

In Friendship,

Sarah Komashko

**Parliamentary Engagement officer**