Question 1: What do you understand the role of CPGs in the Scottish Parliament to be?

Age Scotland believes Cross-Party Groups (CPGs) provide a formal opportunity for members of all political parties, outside organisations and members of the public to meet and discuss a shared interest in a particular cause or subject. In particular it creates an environment for non campaigning organisations to alert a forum of Parliamentarians about the work they are developing issues and research. This in turn will help Parliamentarians with the scrutiny of Government policies and legislation.

Question 2: What benefits does the existence of CPGs bring to non-MSPs in terms of engagement with MSPs and the work of the Scottish Parliament?

Age Scotland believes Cross Party Groups can be a useful lever for non MSPs to raise issues of substance with MSPs and alert Parliamentarians to developments in public policy and wider issues related to the CPG group. For example earlier this year the cross party on older people, age and ageing held a session on the positive aspects of ageing which provided an opportunity for non campaigning organisations, in this case the centre of cognitive ageing at Edinburgh University and Glasgow Caledonian University to present on issues that are often not raised as pressing public policy issues. The CPG heard about the study of the Lothian Birth Cohorts of 1921 and 1936 and the analysis of the effects of ageing throughout a population and also a project on ‘Active Ageing in Action’ which helps older people stay healthy and active through targeted exercise. Both issues were well received by the CPG and in normal circumstance it would be unlikely for MSPs to hear about the work of the academics in this area as they often struggle to disseminate their findings to inform public policy.

Other sessions of the CPG on older people, age and ageing have heard from key civil servants and public sector workers. This provides a level of understanding for Parliamentarians, and indeed for non MSP members, which is often missing from simply reading briefing papers and reports and as detailed above should aid the scrutiny of public policy.

Question 3: Do you consider that the Code could be clearer on the process for establishing and registering a Cross-Party Group? If so, please provide comments as to any specific elements of the process that, in your experience, could be improved.
In the view of Age Scotland, the rules and process for establishing and registering a Cross Party Group are clear and mostly appropriate. However given the election results in May 2011, the charity believe that it would be worthwhile reviewing the minimum number of parties to be represented on the Cross Party Group to allow it to re-register after each election. The smaller Liberal Democrat parliamentary party pool post May 2011 have made it difficult for many groups to identify to requisite number of cross party MSPs to register a group. The charity would recommend that new criteria for MSP membership would be to ensure that individuals on the Cross Party Group represent 70-75% of the Parliamentary Parties, this would currently equate to 90-97 MSPs. However the charity believe that the minimum number of MSP signatories at 5 should remain.

Question 4: The Code of Conduct requires that a Group’s overall membership profile must be “parliamentary in character”. What do you understand the term “parliamentary in character” to mean in the context of Cross-Party Groups and is the minimum requirement of 5 MSP members sufficient to meet this requirement?

We recognise the term “parliamentary in character” to mean that the MSP CPG members will have control of any group and that there is appropriate MSP representation at each meeting. As discussed above the charity believe the minimum number of 5 signatories to the CPG remain an appropriate number. If a higher threshold was in place the likelihood is that some Parliamentarians may sign up to CPGs without ever attending the meetings.

Question 5: When applying for recognition, CPG conveners must submit two forms, one of which must be submitted in hard copy. Would it benefit CPGs if the forms were combined and electronic submission was accepted for this single form?

Yes. A traditional time for re-registering a Cross Party Group is the summer recess after a May election at which time Parliamentarians and their staff will often be located in a constituency office away from the Parliament. By allowing a single electronic submission for the CPG Convenor’s office this would allow registration to be conducted remotely and reduce unnecessary administration task for the Convenor’s office once their staff return to Holyrood.

Question 6: CPGs are required to register any financial or material support received from a single source in a calendar year which has a total value of more than £500. This £500 threshold is close to the threshold above which individual MSPs are required to register gifts in their Register of Interests. Do you consider that the £500 threshold is appropriate and should be retained?

Yes. Cross Party Groups are permitted to raise revenue from their membership with annual fees (money is required to cover costs such as refreshments and on occasion travel expenses) and while this is appropriate we believe that there should be disclosure for any significant financial or
material donation. The vast majority of groups are unlikely to ever receive a donation equalling £500 in value however the principle of disclosure helps expand transparency with regards to the declaration of interests of MSPs. It also tackles any perception about the advocacy of issues in return for payment or benefit in kind.

**Question 7:** The Rules on All-Party Groups at Westminster require that, where secretariat services are provided by a consultancy or by a charity/not-for-profit organisation, the relevant organisation must agree to make certain information available on request. The information for a consultancy firm is its full client list and for a charity/not-for profit organisation is a list of any commercial company which has made a donation or donations of more than £5,000 in the twelve months prior to the request being made comments as to any specific elements of the process that, in your experience, could be improved.

In the interest of greater transparency the charity would be pleased to produce a list of commercial organisations that have made donations above £5,000 to the charity within the previous 12 months. Age Scotland do not believe the task would be particularly onerous or time consuming for the not for profit organisations that provide secretariat support. For example Age Scotland currently disclose the names of all corporates that provide the charity with donations in excess of £500 and Trusts and foundation that provide support in excess of £2000 in our annual report and it would be a simple task of sharing this information with the appropriate Parliamentary body.

**Question 8:** Following a general election, CPGs have 90 days within which they can re-register, provided that there is no significant change to the information registered in the previous Session. Due to the changes in MSPs that arise following an election, the process that must be followed for re-registration is largely similar to that for the initial registration of a Group. The Parliamentary timetable also means that the re-registration period carries into the summer recess, during which the election of office bearers cannot be carried out, meaning that CPGs wishing to re-register must arrange and hold their first meetings before the start of the recess.

**What are your views on whether—**

- the re-registration provision should be retained, and if so
- the re-registration period should exclude days when the Parliament is in recess?

As discussed above Age Scotland believes the principal issue is the number of cross party MSPs required after each election. This should be reviewed after every Parliamentary election to ensure the number of signatories is appropriate and proportionate to the Parliament’s balance. Post May 2011 there have been challenges from groups in obtaining Scottish Liberal Democrat representation and as such we consider that this criteria is too high.
With respect to the re-registration period we believe that is only feasible to have groups re-register when Parliament is in session to ensure that there are appropriate numbers of MSPs available to allow the election of office bearers. We accept there is a challenge in having the summer recess less than 60 days after a Scottish Parliamentary election but for the groups to remain parliamentary in character the charity believes the group must meet when MSPs are in session. Indeed if a group fail to register before the recess then they can re-register the group in after the summer recess without any consequences.

**Question 9**: The Code states that “to maintain and guarantee the Parliamentary nature of CPG meetings, at least 2 MSP members of a Group must be present at every meeting”. Is the 2 MSP quorum sufficient to ensure the Parliamentary nature of CPG meetings? Should there be a requirement that the MSPs present should represent more than one of the political parties represented on the Group?

Political parties are made up of different members who have interests in different issues. With regard to the CPG on older people, age and ageing one MSP may be interested in older people’s care services, while another may have an interest in employability or fuel poverty. That Parliamentarians are of the same party does not mean their interests overlap and as such the charity does not feel a requirement to ensure that attendees are members of different political parties adds a value to the CPG. While Age Scotland accept it would be preferable to have a large number of cross party MSPs the important characteristic is that the MSPs are engaged with the group not what party colour they wear.

**Question 10**: Should CPGs be required to hold a minimum number of meetings per year? If so, what should the minimum number be?

The Cross Party Group of Older People, Age and Ageing has met six times since June 2011. This level of frequency may not suit all Cross Party Groups, but the charity believes that groups should meet at least four times per calendar year to demonstrate their relevance. If a group is incapable of meeting every three months then the charity believes this demonstrates that there is little appetite to continue with the group and that it should be de-registered.

**Question 11**: All Groups are required to hold an annual general meeting and to elect office bearers every twelve months. As Groups must elect officer bearers for the purpose of both initial registration and re-registration, do you consider that there would be any benefits to introducing a single date by which all Groups must hold their AGM? For example, if the Parliament’s first meeting of a Session was on 11 May, would the 11 May in each successive year be a suitable date by which an AGM must be held?
No. The charity believes that the rules should allow for flexibility around when the groups elect office bearers. While election of office bearers would preferably come at the same point in the calendar year if it proves impossible to arrange a meeting for that date then we would expect the CPG to meet as close as possible to this date. Taking summer recess into consideration this could be around 14 or 15 month after the last AGM. The charity does not believe this act has any material impact on the effectiveness of the CPG and as such would suggest that groups elect office bearers once every calendar year. The specific timing should be left to meet the demands of the individual group.

**Question 12:** The Code currently provides that there are limitations on the use of Parliamentary resources to support CPG meetings. What are your views on these limitations?

(Note: this does not apply to CPG events which are subject to the same terms and conditions as any other MSP-sponsored event held under the SPCB events policy.)

Other than access to the rooms, IT support where applicable and refreshments for meetings Age Scotland does consider it necessary for groups to have access to any Parliamentary resources. Groups meeting in the Parliament should not expect Parliamentary (taxpayer) resources to be used to facilitate any meetings and as such the charity is comfortable with existing limitation on use of resources.

**Question 13:** The Convener of a Group is held primarily responsible for ensuring that the Group operates in compliance with the Code of Conduct and has to sign a declaration to that effect. Do you have any views on whether this should continue or if the provisions should be changed to extend the responsibility to all MSP office bearers of a Group?

The charity has no views on this question.

**Question 14:** Groups are required to provide an annual report (submitted within 30 days of their AGM) which includes current membership and membership changes, a financial statement, the number of meetings held and any additional information that the Group wishes to provide. Should Groups be required to include additional information, such as the topics discussed at each meeting, number of MSP and non-MSP attendees and details of any reports or papers published by the Group?

It would be a simple matter for groups to report on the additional activity including meeting topics, attendees at each meeting and details of any reports as is proposed in the question. However Age Scotland believes the current requirements are sufficient for groups to report on. We question if the additional data would be used in any meaningful way and without clarity on what the further information is for we believe the current reporting regime which allows for groups to add any supplementary information is sufficient.
**Question 15:** At present, the SPPA Committee has not delegated to the Standards clerks any role in ensuring that CPGs are aware of and comply with the key rules relating to the administration of CPGs. What are your views on whether it would be of assistance to CPGs if the Standards clerks were to perform such a role in relation to matters such as the notification of CPG meetings, updates to registration details and deadlines for submission of documentation?

Age Scotland believes there is value in developing a supporting role to the CPGs from the Standards Committee. Many organisations that provide secretariat support have a high staff turnover and much of the knowledge about the administration of CPG’s can be lost when a single individual leaves the group. The charity believe it would be appropriate for groups, when registering or re registering after a Scottish Parliament election, to have the secretary attend a CPG administration session to ensure the group complies with all necessary standards. Unless there is a material change in standards in the middle of a Parliamentary session we do not believe that refresher courses are needed through the year for existing Secretariat support staff, although an induction for mid-session appointees would be of value to new staff.

**Question 16:** Do you have any other comments on the operation of the CPG system in the Scottish Parliament?

The charity considers that an effective mechanism for bringing to revitalise the Cross Party Group landscape could be the allocation of a number of subject debates in the chamber, which would be decided by ballot. Groups would need to meet the minimum criteria with regards to entering the ballot including number of meetings, MSP attendance, holding an AGM and disclosure of any donations. But we believe for those groups that are demonstrating accordance with both the letter and the spirit of the rule that the opportunity for subject debate in Government time could provide an effective forum to ensure often under discussed issue get debated in a public forum.

AGE SCOTLAND
12 APRIL 2012