CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

General

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

To enable members of the public and interested parties engage with MSPs to discuss issues which are of relevance to the Scottish Parliament, in particular enabling discussion on Scottish Government policy and actions and to enable MSP's to debate and discuss issues that will inform their Parliamentary work.

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?

I think it's hugely beneficial in enabling MSPs to engage with members of the public and discuss issues, such as academic research or best practice in a sustained format which means that campaigns and Parliamentary work are enriched. It enables Parliamentarians to build expertise on issues which they can then bring into their work in committees, the chamber, or in terms of making representations on behalf of their constituents. It is also an opportunity for members of the public to participate in our political debates as envisaged when the Scottish Parliament was being founded.

Registration of Cross-Party Groups

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.

I have not been in the position of establishing a Cross Party Group from the beginning but when there is a change of office bearers it might be helpful to issue the new office bearers with the key issues they need to be aware of.

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?

See my answer to Questions 1 & 2.
The Cross Party nature of groups is important in ensuring that there is genuine support across the Parliament for the existence of groups, although in practice the full complement of MSPs may not take a consistent and active part in the CPG. If the threshold were to be raised I would be concerned. It could lead to valuable work being cancelled and not being capable of being sustained.

**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.

**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 agree that the £500 threshold is appropriate. I am not sure what this question is driving at? Surely the two should not be confused? One is to an individual MSP the other to a CPG.

**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. Should a similar requirement be introduced for CPGs?

Is there any concern that our rules are not sufficiently robust? If so should that not be the basis of this question not merely asking us whether we should adopt exactly the same operation as All Party Groups? I think this should be explored in more detail if there are concerns about the issue.

**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 reregistration 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?

I think the principle of a re-registration process is appropriate. A new session requires a fresh view and Parliamentarians should decide what CPGs are appropriate rather than just automatically continuing groups without considering whether there is support for them. I would be slightly more lenient than at present, but would not allow more than the first month of the autumn session for re-registration. That should allow a bit more time than exists at present which is rather tight given post-election pressures.

Operation of Cross-Party Groups

**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?

I think the system works pretty well at the moment.

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

I think two a year would be a sensible lower limit.

**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?

The downside with this would be a huge pressure to accommodate 60 odd CPGs within days of each other. This would also be problematic for members involved in more than one group. What would be the argument for this change? The more I think about this, the more I think it would be tidy on paper and a logistical nightmare to deliver. We don’t have the space to accommodate this. Plus if there’s to be flexibility as suggested in question 8 which I think is a good thing – this would cut across this initiative.

**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.)
It can be difficult getting all the members up to the meeting rooms swiftly and depends on MSP staff being prepared to stay on into the evening session.

**Regulation of Cross-Party Groups**

*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?

What would be the benefit in this. Is there evidence that the current system is not working?

*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?

This would potentially be cumbersome and increase the pressure on those groups which are not supported by an external secretariat. Again the practicalities need to be thought through.

*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?

I think the key issue is for new groups being established and where there is a significant change in either the office bearers or secretariats. Initial best practice information would have been useful. It’s good to be able to submit our views in this consultation. The main thing is to keep the process of running CPGs straightforward. Is there a concern that CPGs aren’t working properly and need more support?

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

**SARAH BOYACK MSP**

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