As you know, the Conveners Group recently discussed your request for views to the inquiry into the reform of parliamentary business. The Group agreed that I should respond on its behalf, setting out the key issues that were discussed.

Firstly, I welcome the early opportunity to contribute to your inquiry, particularly given the work that the Group is currently undertaking as part of the committee reform agenda. In the context of the wider programme for change, I agree that it is important that both pieces of work complement each other and that we avoid any duplication of effort.

The Group considered options for revising sitting patterns, including the suggestion of holding plenary meetings on three afternoons a week. Conveners expressed a range of views in relation to sitting patterns, but the Group did not reach an agreed final position.

The Group considered, however, that a number of measures could be employed that would be beneficial to committees in terms of the delivery of parliamentary business in the Chamber. As part of the reform agenda for committees, the Group has agreed options for holding committee debates in the Chamber other than on committee reports. The Group was of the view that this would raise the profile of committees in the Chamber, and would go some way to meeting the overall aim of increasing committees’ agility, responsiveness and focus. It could also act as a vehicle for introducing new forms of business into the Chamber, thereby enhancing the relevance of parliamentary business.

Following on from its discussion on sitting patterns, the Group addressed a number of other topics that your Committee may wish to take into account as you conclude your current inquiry and take other matters forward next year. The following outlines a range of views expressed by Conveners: it does not purport to be the consensus of the Group.

Conveners raised concerns about the current timing of Stage 3 proceedings. The Group was aware of occasions in the past where amendments had either not been debated, or had only received a very short time allocation, due to the need to conclude proceedings by 5.00 pm. Views were therefore expressed that, in the interests of ensuring that the Parliament passes the best possible legislation, Stage 3 proceedings should be allowed to run until such time as each amendment has been properly debated and disposed of.
It was suggested that committees should be more flexible in considering when they meet, including at times when the Chamber sits. This could enable committees to be more responsive. The removal of some meeting restrictions could also play a part in highlighting the role and work of committees to the public, making meetings more relevant and accessible. Any relaxation in Rule 12.3.3A could be used sparingly and be conditional upon regulating the circumstances and authority necessary to allow concomitant meetings and to avoid committee business conflicting unintentionally with chamber business.

The Group also discussed the arrangements for question times and broadly agreed that the current timing and operation of question times could be improved. It was suggested that changes needed to be brought in that would enable question times, particularly themed questions, to be more topical and relevant.

In addition to scheduling question times at an earlier point during the parliamentary week, suggestions included speeding up the ballot and selection process as a means of increasing the topicality of question times. In particular, some views were expressed that the requirement to lodge the text of a question so far in advance did not lend itself to raising current issues.

The procedure for emergency questions was discussed and it was suggested that any review of the arrangements for question times should include this procedure as well.

I hope that these comments are helpful to your Committee in the course of your inquiries.

TRICIA MARWICK MSP
PRESIDING OFFICER
3 NOVEMBER 2011