STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS
COMMITTEE

REVIEW OF CROSS-PARTY GROUPS

WRITTEN SUBMISSION RECEIVED FROM CROSS-PARTY GROUP ON
CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

This response has been prepared by Children in Scotland and Youthlink Scotland (joint secretariat) on behalf of the Cross Party Group on Children and Young People.

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

To provide a forum for MSPs, parliament staff and interested organisations and individuals to discuss relevant issues in a less politicised manner than in other outlets, such as the debating chamber and committees. It allows organisations individuals to bring new issues to the attention of elected members.

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?

It can provide an opportunity for engagement that may not be open to organisations who do not have the resources for someone to be regularly in contact with parliament and elected representatives (eg no full time policy or parliamentary officer).

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.

This CPG has been in existence for many years so we cannot comment on the ease of setting up a new group. We find the registration process relatively clear and requests for support are swiftly met. Perhaps more detailed guidance on what is needed and when would be useful.

4. The Code of Conduct requires that a Group’s overall membership should 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?

That meetings would ordinarily take place within the Scottish Parliament and be chaired and convened by an MSP. A minimum of 5 members seems sufficient – we have in excess of this but realise there may be groups with a smaller remit.
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? We would be happy with this change.

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?

We are content with this. At this point we would like to mention the membership fee we ask group members to pay to cover the costs of catering at meetings. We have been approached by other cross party groups (in the Scottish Parliament and beyond) to explain how this works in practice. Perhaps this is an area of which clearer guidance is required.

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?

We do not have a strong view on this, but would have no problem in providing such information.

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?

Based on our experience following the 2011 election, we believe it would be beneficial to extend this period – ie having the re-registration period exclude
days when the Parliament is in recess. Many groups were scrambling to have meetings before summer recess, and it was not entirely clear to all that the 90 days included the recess period.

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?

We believe the 2 MSP quorum should be retained, but we do not think it is necessary for them to represent more than one party. There may be occasions where it is difficult for certain party members to attend – eg if it clashes with a group meeting. Also, even though there may, for example, only be MSPs from one political party at the meeting, there may be party staff/researchers representing other MSPs in the room – thus ensuring the cross party nature of the group and meeting.

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

We have no strong opinion on this.

11. All Groups are required to hold an annual general meeting and to elect office bearers every twelve months. As Groups must elect office 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?

We do not think this would be a helpful addition. At present this takes place towards the end of the parliamentary year in May/June. Logistically it would be an extra burden to have it take place by a certain named date.

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?

We were not aware that such limitations existed. One thing which would be useful is for the group secretariat to be given some notice of when they can book rooms for future meetings – or perhaps be given some capacity to make the bookings directly with the Parliament helpdesk. At the moment we are reliant on MSP staff to assist with this – and while we have had generally good experiences, in some cases it has been difficult to find a suitable room for our large group to meet in, even with many months notice.

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?

We are happy for this to remain the responsibility of only the convener, or in our case the co-conveners. More consideration should be given to groups which have co-conveners – for example listing both as contacts on the groups webpage (at the moment only one of ours is listed).

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?

We already include this as standard as part of our annual report and believe it is beneficial to everyone to do so. We would be happy to see this made a requirement, although it could perhaps be accompanied by a template to help people submit this information.

At present the annual return offers the only opportunity to amend the list of named members – both individual and organisation. Many members join part way through the year - but the pages are not updated until after the next report is submitted. Perhaps there could be an arrangement for the groups listed members to be updated more often than every 12 months.

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?

We would welcome a system which gives groups regular reminders on what needs to be done – and when – for example submitting agendas in advance, giving advance warning when annual reports are required etc.

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

We would welcome any mechanism which allows groups and their secretariat to be more closely in contact with each other and be aware of what other groups are doing and the topics they are considering. From our experience all groups operate in their own way, and it may be that they can learn from each other. More could probably be done to encourage others working in the parliament, aside from MSPs, to attend and interact with CPGs – such as
Committee staff and MSP staff. Another population which is missing from meetings is staff from national and local government who may benefit from being there.

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