The Office Bearers of the Cross Party group on Skills are content for the following responses to the inquiry to be used in the public domain.

**General**

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

A forum for the coming together of key opinion formers and MSPs to share ideas and views on relevant issues.

*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?

One of few such forums available to them to come together in this way. Our own CPG membership continues to increase evidencing the real benefit our members experience through their engagement. Many new membership requests are on the basis of interactions with MSPs or the recommendation from existing members. Membership of many CPGs is diverse - the CPG Skills brings together businesses, trade unions, voluntary and education sector representatives for example – and provides excellent networking opportunities.

**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.

In our experience the process and guidance has been clear and easy to follow.

*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?

Our understanding is the relevance to the work of the Parliament. We believe the current 5 MSP requirement is sufficient.
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 – anything simplifying the process would be beneficial.

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?

The threshold is appropriate. Although we have not reached this requirement, as a matter of best practice we record all financial and material support in our annual reporting.

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?

We do not believe that this information is required and could make it difficult in securing such support.

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?

Yes the re-registration process should be retained but the timeframe should exclude days when Parliament is in recess.
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?

We are content with the rules as they currently stand.

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

No.

*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 - this approach would not recognise the practicalities involved in making such arrangements.

*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.)

The limitations currently prescribed do not require amendment.

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?

No strong views.

*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?

We provide additional information in our reporting but chose to do so voluntarily and would leave other CPGs to determine what additional information is appropriate to their own report.

**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?

Our own experience has been that the Clerks have provided help and guidance when called upon, more so during the previous administration than this term, but nonetheless our understanding is that Standards Clerks would be the initial port of call for clarification and guidance. Instruction and guidance provided by the Clerks when initially setting up and during key points such as ahead of the AGM/ AR1 report has given us the clarity required to abide within the rules.

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

Broadly speaking the system works well, minor enhancements could be possible but we would not wish anything changed that would result in creating a burden to the operation of a CPG.

**CROSS-PARTY GROUP ON SKILLS**

**30 MARCH 2012**