With regard to the issues which are being considered in the context of your inquiry, the following represents the views of Conservative Members as garnered by me over the summer in response to an earlier request for feedback from the Presiding Officer.

On balance the majority of our Members agree with the proposal that there should be chamber sittings on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. However this should be more than mere tokenism and substantial business including Ministerial Question Times should be scheduled over all three days. For those Members who do not normally have committee meetings on Tuesdays this change will reduce their ability to attend events and meetings in their constituencies/regions on that day. However the intention at the outset of the Parliament was that the working week for MSPs should involve being in Parliament on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays with Mondays and Fridays being allocated for constituency business. There has been some slippage from that concept and it is interesting to note how many major committees of the Parliament with weekly meeting schedules meet on Wednesday mornings rather than Tuesdays.

Our Members do not think that Ministerial Question Times work satisfactorily. There is not enough spontaneity or topicality due to the requirement to table questions one week in advance. There should be more scope in these sessions for open questions and time should be specifically allocated to opposition spokespersons so that they can question the Ministers in these sessions not just those Members who are successful in the ballot. First Minister’s Question Time already has open question slots for opposition party leaders and the same principle should apply to Cabinet Secretaries/Ministers and their shadows.

As regards the timing of FMQs, our Members would support retention of the present 12-12.30 slot on Thursdays. Accordingly if committees were to meet on Thursday mornings they would require to finish by 11.45 a.m. There is no reason why this can’t be done and the committees if necessary could start their meetings 30 or 45 minutes earlier.

Returning FMQs to a Thursday afternoon slot would be a retrograde step. As a former party leader who has experience of such a timetable, I can say it resulted in the focus of the First Minister and opposition party leaders and their staff being on that session for virtually the whole of the day. Having FMQs at 12 noon means that the First Minister and opposition party leaders
still have a meaningful amount of time in the day after FMQs to deal with other matters and engagements.

Our Members were in favour of extending Decision Time on Tuesdays and Wednesdays to 6.00 p.m. or later where we are dealing with Stage 3 of a major Bill to allow a fuller discussion of final stage amendments or in debates where the subject matter is contentious and of significant public interest.

Generally speaking, fewer but longer speeches are considered preferable to a greater number of relatively short 4 or 6 minute open debate speeches. Quality is far more important than quantity. An emphasis on fewer but longer speeches would facilitate interventions and lead to a livelier and better informed debate overall. Longer debates with even more 6 minute open debate contributions are likely to produce a turgid outcome with tedious repetition of the same points.

In addition to the above points which are a distillation of a collective view, you may be interested in my personal views on several other issues which you have raised and which are under consideration by your Committee:-

1. In general terms we need to ensure that the business of the Parliament whether conducted in the chamber or in committees is topical and is addressing issues of current public concern. I think it is a fair criticism that sometimes procedures and established methods of working are preventing a more rapid response to issues in the Parliament itself. This means that Parliament ceases to be the forum in which these topics are aired and discussed which is not good for the standing and reputation of the Parliament as the national forum for debate and for holding the Government to account.

2. In exceptional circumstances, committees should be able to meet at the same time as debates are being held in the chamber. However if we have committee meetings on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, this should provide greater flexibility for timetabling witness sessions so this would remain a comparative rarity.

3. With regard to the issue of backbench influence on the content of Parliamentary business, it would be worthwhile considering the role of the Backbench Business Committee in the House of Commons and whether there is scope for a similar procedure in the Scottish Parliament. However any time allocated for this purpose should not be at the expense of the time allocated to opposition parties. There may be scope for adjustment by reference to the time presently allocated to committee business.

4. I do think that there is considerable scope for more post legislative scrutiny in the Parliament. Parliamentary committees should be required as a matter of practice to conduct reviews of legislation which they considered initially say two or three years after the legislative
changes came into force with a view to assessing whether the objectives of the legislation are being met.

I hope this is helpful.

David McLetchie MSP
27 October 2011