Cross Party Group on Disability

Thank you for giving Quarriers the opportunity to respond to this consultation. Quarriers is a major Scottish charity providing practical care and support every day to thousands of people. Through more than 120 services for Adult Disability, Children and Families, Epilepsy and Young Adults in Scotland and a growing number of services in parts of England, we challenge inequality of opportunity and choice, to bring about positive change in people’s lives.

Quarriers is represented on a number of Cross Party Groups but also provides the secretariat for the Cross Party Group on Disability, and this response has been prepared in relation to that role.

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

Cross Party Groups provide an opportunity for awareness-raising and more in-depth discussions on specific topics between MSPs and relevant organisations, in an environment that allows for non-political debate.

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?

Cross Party Groups allow organisations to engage with MSPs who have declared a particular interest in an individual issue, and to build productive relationships.

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.

Although I have not had to establish a new CPG, the re-registration process at the beginning of this parliamentary session seemed fairly straightforward.

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?
I understand “parliamentary in character” to mean that Groups should meet at the Scottish Parliament, have a minimum number of MSP members, and should follow the regulatory framework set out by the Scottish Parliament. A minimum of 5 MSP members seems reasonable.

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?

This would seem reasonable.

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?

This would seem reasonable.

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?

Whilst I appreciate the need for transparency, comprehensive guidance would have to be provided on the circumstances under which such a request could be made, and there would have to be clear evidence that such a request related directly to the business of the CPG, and concerns about the way in which that business was being conducted.

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?

It is not entirely clear why a formal re-registration process needs to be undertaken after a general election, if the information is largely the same. Perhaps consideration could be given to altering the process, to allow notification of changes in MSP membership, and thus streamlining the procedure.

The re-registration period should exclude days when the Parliament is in recess.

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?

The current quorum requirement seems reasonable, but it is not entirely clear why the MSPs present must always represent more than one party. Difficulties with this requirement can sometimes arise due to the nature of Parliamentary business and conflicting commitments.

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

I believe that it should be for the members of the CPG to determine the frequency of meetings.

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?

I cannot see any benefits in introducing a set date by which all CPGs must hold their AGM.

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?

The only difficulty I have encountered is attempting to secure additional support for a potential member who required a BSL translator. Although this service is available at the Parliament for members of the public meeting with their MSP, the CPG was not permitted to access this Parliamentary resource.
I was advised that we would have to arrange and pay for this service, which was outwith the CPG’s very limited financial resources. It would be helpful if all Parliamentary resources to support people with disabilities could be made available to members of CPGs in order to attend meetings. At the moment, members of the CPG with disabilities can only access very limited support, eg parking spaces, which can occasionally cause difficulties.

It would also be helpful if the secretariat could liaise directly with Parliamentary staff to arrange room bookings, catering, AV requirements etc, rather than having to continually rely on the goodwill of MSP office staff.

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?

It would seem reasonable for compliance with parliamentary regulations to remain the responsibility of the convener.

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?

It is not clear what benefit would arise from a requirement to provide additional information as part of an annual report, provided that minutes of meetings and reports etc are freely available on the CPG website and that reference can be made to this in the report.

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?

This would be helpful.

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

I believe that better use could be made of the CPG web pages and more information could be provided on them. It can currently take some time for changes to be made to web pages and the information available is very limited and can be out of date – eg the list of member organisations is only
updated once a year.

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