STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE

REVIEW OF CROSS-PARTY GROUPS

WRITTEN SUBMISSION RECEIVED FROM SCVO

Summary

- Cross-Party Groups (CPGs) are an important part of the operation of the Scottish Parliament.

- CPGs are often the only outlet individuals/organisations have to engage with MSPs. Organisations that are too small or not on the national radar are not always afforded time in front of committees.

- The Scottish Parliament promotes an ethos of engagement and transparency and as such holding “meetings in the parliament” and not only “meetings of the parliament” allow the public to engage in debate and conversation alongside their elected members.

- It is worth considering a better management of CPG slots by the Parliament to ensure that CPGs are spread out over the parliamentary calendar allowing maximum attendance for MSPs.

Our response

SCVO welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation and would like to contribute to the following questions:

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

General

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

Cross-Party Groups are an important part of the operation of the Scottish Parliament. They provide a natural public facing forum.

CPGs also give a voice/forum to issues that are not always afforded time in committees/plenary sessions of parliament. For these groups/issues CPGs are a valuable resource.

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?

CPGs are often the only outlet individuals/organisations have to engage with MSPs. Organisations that are too small or not on the national radar are not
always afforded time in front of committees (with some citing that committees are a daunting experience to them) and as such CPGs give them a more informal opportunity to inform MSPs on issues related to their work.

The Scottish Parliament promotes an ethos of engagement and transparency and as such holding “meetings in the parliament” and not only “meetings of the parliament” allows the public to engage in debate and conversation alongside their elected members.

Registration of Cross-Party Groups

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?

It is important to maintain a minimum number of MSP members for the formation of a group. It is often a criticism of CPGs that too many exist. If the requirement of five MSP members is reduced it is safe to presume that the number of CPGs might boom again.

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?

It is appropriate yes.

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?

This requirement would not be a barrier to CPGs in the future and there would be little or no objection on this matter. It would be interesting to note how many CPGs operate with a charity/not-for-profit as the secretariat in Holyrood.

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?

It is vital CPGs should be required to reregister for the new parliamentary session.

It may be better to look at the 90-day period and stipulate that it is 90 days when the parliament is sitting. If this approach is taken the 90 days may be reduced to still give ample time.

There is no point having a 90-day period that lapses into the summer recess when no work can be done during the break.

**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?

The quorum is fair and important to the operation of CPGs. There shouldn't be further regulations regarding party membership. Under the current parliamentary composition it should be noted that party representation is dramatically altered to previous sessions.

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

This is an important question. Whilst SCVO does not support groups being forced to hold meetings, the nature of some CPGs is that they rarely meet if at all.

CPGs should be required to hold an annual general meeting to elect office bearers but should not be forced in to meetings periodically.

*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?
There is no harm in setting an official date for AGMs to be held. It would be better practice to state the CPGs must hold an AGM within the calendar year that they were recognised.

**Regulation of Cross-Party Groups**

*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?

It would add no extra value to detail topics discussed at each meeting and would only create a further administrative burden.

Furthermore it would be of no use to detail how many MSP/non-MSP members attended each meeting unless attendance was used to decide if the group should continue to meet.

It would be of help if the Group produced a paper that was highlighted and made available.

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

During evidence to the SPPA Committee (22/11/11) on the Reform of the Parliamentary Week the topic of CPGs was discussed.

It was noted by Paul Wheelhouse MSP that “25 of the 43 CPG meetings that took place between September and November happened on a Wednesday lunchtime or evening.”

It is worth considering a better management of CPG slots by the Parliament to ensure that CPGs are spread out over the parliamentary calendar allowing maximum attendance for MSPs.

**Conclusion**

CPGs are an excellent resource of the Scottish Parliament and their ability to engage the general public in debate and conversation in thematic groupings is important to the transparency and openness of the parliament’s ethos.

It is important to look at how the groups are managed however to ensure MSPs can best use and attend the groups throughout the parliamentary week.
About us

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) is the national body representing the third sector. There are over 45,000 voluntary organisations in Scotland involving around 137,000 paid staff and approximately 1.2 million volunteers. The sector manages an income of £4.4 billion.

SCVO works in partnership with the third sector in Scotland to advance our shared values and interests. We have over 1300 members who range from individuals and grassroots groups, to Scotland-wide organisations and intermediary bodies.

As the only inclusive representative umbrella organisation for the sector SCVO:

- has the largest Scotland-wide membership from the sector – our 1300 members include charities, community groups, social enterprises and voluntary organisations of all shapes and sizes
- our governance and membership structures are democratic and accountable - with an elected board and policy committee from the sector, we are managed by the sector, for the sector
- brings together organisations and networks connecting across the whole of Scotland

SCVO works to support people to take voluntary action to help themselves and others, and to bring about social change. Our policy is determined by a policy committee elected by our members.¹

Further details about SCVO can be found at www.scvo.org.uk.

References

Scottish Voluntary Sector Statistics 2010, SCVO

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POLICY OFFICER
SCOTTISH COUNCIL FOR VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS,
13 APRIL 2012

¹ SCVO’s Policy Committee has 24 members elected by SCVO’s member organisations who then co-opt up to eight more members primarily to reflect fields of interest which are not otherwise represented. It also includes two ex officio members, the SCVO Convener and Vice Convener.