STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE

REFORM OF PARLIAMENTARY BUSINESS: REMODELLING THE PARLIAMENTARY WEEK

WRITTEN SUBMISSION RECEIVED FROM SCVO

Summary

- To facilitate interaction with the Scottish parliament from third sector staff and volunteers the current sociable operating hours and alignment of recess dates with school holidays should be retained

- Procedures that formalise a process for allowing third sector organisations to introduce topics for debate in the chamber and committees should be investigated

- To better understand the effectiveness of existing legislation, more time for post-legislative scrutiny is required in parliament committees

- More time could be devoted by committees for discussion and scrutiny of reserved matters that will have a significant impact on Scotland

- The ban on the use of social media in the chamber and committees should be lifted

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

Our response

SCVO welcomed the inception of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. The opportunity to create a new parliament from the ground up has delivered a modern and progressive set of parliamentary procedures. Now that the parliament is 12 years old we are pleased to contribute to this review of how successful these procedures have been for the effectiveness and relevance of the parliament.

In general the existence of the Scottish Parliament has been of great benefit to the third sector. By bringing decision making closer to organisations and opening up channels for influencing, the third sector has increased opportunities to effect change. Parliamentary procedures are fundamental to that influence, setting out the structures for engagement and ensuring transparency and accountability.

Phase One – Remodelling the parliamentary week

SCVO believes that the current schedule and structure of the parliamentary week serves its purpose well and provides good opportunities for engagement from the third sector. We would not support any changes which would have an adverse effect on the ability of organisations and individuals to participate in the work of the parliament.

Currently the vast majority of parliamentary activity takes place within a standard working day. Structuring the parliament in this way allows individuals whose work is concerned with the parliament to be involved during sociable hours which promotes a healthy work/life balance. This stands in stark contrast to the structure at Westminster, with its late sittings in the chamber and committees. The current alignment of recess dates with school holidays is also logical and beneficial as it allows those with children to maintain an involvement with the work of the parliament.

Retaining the current sociable hours and alignment of recess dates with school holiday is desirable and we would not support any reforms which undermine that schedule as they would have a negative impact on the ability of staff and volunteers of third sector organisations to engage in debate and participate in activity at the parliament.

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.
It should also be noted that the parliamentary week allows MSPs and parliamentary staff a better work/life balance, particularly if they have children, and this is something which is worth maintaining. Although not directly relevant to the third sector, the idea that becoming a MSP should be a possibility for people from the widest variety of backgrounds and circumstances is something the sector supports.

**Phase Two – Parliamentary procedures**

SCVO believes there are a number of parliamentary procedures which could be reformed to improve third sector involvement with the parliament and that the following areas should be investigated as part of the second phase of the enquiry.

**Topical debates**

We recognise the need for the parliament’s work to remain current and would welcome more flexibility in introducing topical matters. We would like to see formal procedures that allow third sector organisations to introduce topics for debate in the chamber and committees. This would improve the third sector’s ability to influence the work of the parliament and ensure that issues raised by our members have the opportunity to be debated.

Whilst recognising the need for topical debates, forward planning is essential for all third sector organisations working with the parliament. Due to small staff teams it is important to have as much notice as possible of upcoming business in the chamber and committees.

Policy officers and others contributing need time to consult with members and colleagues before contributing briefings and giving evidence. At present there is sometimes a very short gap between the motion for debate during Government and party business being published and the debate itself taking place. Giving more notice of chamber and committee subjects for discussion and debate would allow more interaction from the third sector and the public.

**Committees**

Our view is that the current number and structure of committees generally works well for the business of the parliament. Third sector groups regularly give evidence at committees and are a vital component in shaping and informing the debate. To improve the work of committees more time could be given over to committee investigations and inquiries. Consideration should also be given to establishing bill committees as they could provide more opportunity for external involvement with the process whilst freeing up time for subject committees to conduct their wider inquiries.

Consideration should be given to allocating more time in committees for post-legislative scrutiny. It is our view that the current arrangements do not devote enough time to this important process. This could be achieved through more time in subject committees or in the establishment of a specific scrutiny
committee. Committing more time to this area would allow for a more thorough review of the implementation of legislation and a greater understanding of its effectiveness.

SCVO also believes that more time could be devoted by committees for discussions and scrutiny of reserved matters that will have a significant impact on Scotland. The Welfare Reform Bill is a current example of legislation that will affect Scotland and therefore requires additional time in committees.

Community engagement

The Scottish Parliament should continue its commitment to taking its work out to the people of Scotland. We welcomed the cabinet's tour of Scotland this year, but more could be done to ensure that everyone across Scotland has the opportunity to participate in parliamentary activity. Committees already take their work out to other areas of Scotland, but we would like to see other parliamentary business further ‘devolved’ across Scotland.

The Community Partnerships Project is an effective way of bringing more views into the parliament. Giving a voice to those usually under-represented in politics should be an ongoing focus for the parliament. We would like to see the scope of the scheme widened, and more organisations and MSPs getting involved.

Cross Party Groups

Cross Party Groups are an excellent opportunity for the public and third sector to become involved in the work of the parliament. More could be done to publicise the role of these groups and encourage individuals to get involved through the website. Bringing new people into these groups is vital to ensure they remain fresh and relevant.

Social media

We support Patrick Harvie's motion on lifting the ban on Twitter and other forms of social media in the debating chamber. A similar change has recently been adopted in the House of Commons. Social media provides an excellent medium for direct engagement of MSPs by the public. It not only has the potential to alert people to the existence of topics being debated but also provides a two-way communication tool for bringing in ideas and increasing public participation. Social media offers a unique opportunity for individuals and organisations to engage with MSPs on a daily basis. Its introduction to the chamber would be a progressive step forward for participative democracy.

SPICe

The Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) briefings and factsheets are useful tools for providing factual information on a subject area. However, there is scope for improvements to be made by bringing in external views on a subject. By incorporating opinions and evidence from across the public,
private and third sectors, the briefings could provide a more nuanced view of a subject and would give MSPs and researchers a broader understanding of the issue.

**Inspiration for the day**

We would like to propose a new slot in the parliamentary day of similar length to the ‘Time for reflection’. This ‘Inspiration for the day’ slot would allow the chamber to hear from an individual working on the ground for a third sector organisation as well as other sectors. This would give those present in the chamber valuable context and inspiration for the day and remind them of the good work carried out by staff and volunteers across Scotland.

**Conclusion**

The Scottish Parliament’s procedures generally work well for the third sector. We would strongly urge the retention of the sociable hours within the working week and alignment with school holidays. There are also changes detailed above that could provide greater interaction between the third sector, the public and the parliament, that should be investigated in the second phase of the enquiry.

**References**

*Scottish Voluntary Sector Statistics 2010*, SCVO  

Felix Spittal  
Policy Officer  
Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations  
31 October 2011