We are delighted to have the opportunity to respond to the following consultation on Cross Party Groups and hope that our contribution will be of interest.

The Scottish Disability Equality Forum (SDEF) works for social inclusion in Scotland through the removal of barriers and the promotion of equal access for people affected by disability.

It is a membership organisation, representing individuals with any type of impairment, disability organisations and groups who share our values. It aims to ensure that the voices of people affected by disability are heard and heeded. SDEF promotes access in its widest sense, including access to the built and natural environment and access to the same opportunities as are enjoyed by other people in our community.

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

Cross Party Groups enable individuals from any background with a political or subject specific interest to convene and discuss current issues around that area. The outcomes of these discussions can enable MSPs to make more informed decisions which are reflective of the wider community.

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 provide a forum for discussion which involves both non-MSPs and MSPs in a meaningful and productive way. Further, tangible outcomes achieved through this involvement between society and government can incentivise individuals to become actively involved in their political landscape.

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.

The process, as explained on the website seems clear and 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 the structure, conduct, and conduits for change/discussion follow normal parliamentary processes. However, the use of the term is not particularly accessible and SDEF would suggest that this be given consideration, bearing in mind that Cross Party Group members will typically come from a diverse range of backgrounds, experience and ability.

I think the requirement of 5 MSP members is sufficient if all attend, but that the number of MSPs required for the meetings to be quorate should be raised to four.

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 possibly be easier, with care taken to ensure that forms continue to follow guidelines on inclusive communication.

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 seems an appropriate amount.

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?

A similar requirement should be made to ensure complete transparency around donations to eliminate the possibility of perceived external influences.

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 seems sensible to retain re-registration bearing in mind the changes in MSPs following an election. However, the process does seem to be unnecessarily complex, especially taking into account the time restrictions imposed for meetings prior to the Summer recess. The re-registration period should not 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 rather low, and is unlikely to be representative across varying political party views. MSPs present should represent their party, and a minimum of 4 MSPs as a quorum requirement would create a wider political representation.

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

The frequency of meetings will likely depend upon the issues being raised through changes in the political landscape and legislation. A minimum number of meetings – perhaps 3 per annum would, however, ensure that the Cross Party Group members maintain good cohesion and communication.

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?

The scattering of AGM dates throughout the year, would, I imagine, reduce a bottleneck in administration.
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?

It is vital to ensure that all resources required to support CPG meetings are where possible, available, in full and on time. CPG meetings are important tools in creating productive fora to effect positive change – this should be acknowledged and addressed with regard to current limitations.

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?

Ultimately, the Convener should continue to bear primary responsibility, even when MSP office bearers have compliance as part of their remit.

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?

This would be helpful to reduce duplication of discussion, or to track political activity within the group where some issues may be lengthy in nature.

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?

A more central approach to these matters would be helpful in ensuring that information is disseminated appropriately and timeously.

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