SCOTLAND’S FUTURES FORUM: FUTURE SUPPORT

Executive Summary

1. The SPCB asked for a further paper, following their discussion on 15 December 2010, to be brought forward outlining proposals for how the work of the Forum may be taken forward in 2011 and beyond. The SPCB invited views from the Forum’s Board of Directors. A letter from the Board to the SPCB is attached.

Background

2. Currently, the SPCB part funds the Forum by meeting associated staff costs for the Director (£73,000) and a cash contribution each year of around £18,000, which covers some core costs. All other costs, around £70,000 in previous years, are met by external contributions and through partnership funding.

3. Since its inception the Forum has been closely aligned to two of the Parliament’s strategic priorities - to support MSPs in their roles and engagement. The SPCB is aware of the annual work programmes undertaken by the Forum and the significant amounts of work completed. This includes the Forum working closely with MSPs and parliamentary committees, providing a futures perspective through evidence, research, events and projects. In particular, the Forum’s work around an ageing society, alcohol and drugs has been especially welcomed by MSPs. The Forum also has a very good reputation for the strong partnerships it has formed with external networks and strategic organisations.

2011 and beyond - Options

4. The SPCB may wish to consider three options as outlined below.

Optional 1

5. Of the initial budget of £92,000, the SPCB could agree to fund the Forum for a further year, at the much reduced cost of £40,000. This money would allow the Forum to complete most of its existing programme commitments, undertake any ad-hoc commissioned work from Committees and, most important, provide time for a full options paper to be brought forward to the new SPCB in June 2011. That options paper would also provide detailed options on how to better utilise the remaining £52,000 to commission and work with external bodies, if the new SPCB wanted to.
Option 2

6. The SPCB could wind-down the Forum’s activities up to June 2011, when the Company could be dissolved. The budget already allocated could be used to fund futures research within an existing Department; for example, within the Clerking Team. This new ‘forum’ could act as a commissioning agent for parliamentary committees, bringing together, on request, futures papers and research from external think-tanks and research bodies.

Option 3

7. Lastly, as discussed, it is open to completely wind-up the company as at June 2011.

Discussion

8. The costs of the Forum for 2011/12 were included in the overall budget agreed to by the SPCB and Finance Committee at the end of 2010. However, it should be noted that the current staff director is leaving post, and as an employee of the Corporate Body, under the VES scheme, effective from 22 March 2011. **Under option 1 he need not be replaced, leaving £52,000 available for commissioning / partnering futures work with external bodies. The Forum’s sole direct employee could then coordinate activities on a part time basis until March 2012.** This is based on no external funding being attracted.

9. The view emerging from the SPCB’s previous discussion was that their financial contribution should be used to commission or form partnerships with outside organisations as and when required by Committees. **Option 1 would allow this.** It would also allow time for discussions with the new Committees and for detailed proposals to be brought forward to the new SPCB on how to develop intelligent collaborations and commissioned futures work with for example, the David Hume Institute, The Scottish Universities Insight Institute and the Goodison Group.

10. **Option 1 would also allow time for the new SPCB to consider how, and if, they wished to use the Company as a resource in the new Parliament.**

11. Under **option 2**, the money saved could be used to augment the Convenors Group’s external research budget or could be used to augment the FSU budget. This additional work has not, however been factored into departmental plans for 2011 and would come up against other competing demands on staff time. Under option 2 (and option 3) the SPCB would be losing the company “Scotland’s Futures Forum Limited”; a resource which does not cost anything to have in itself, and may well be a resource which the next SPCB would wish to utilise. Under option 2, by giving up the company, the ability of the Forum to attract external funding for partnership working would also be lost. In past years, this has amounted to around £70,000 per year.
12. The reasons for not simply dissolving the Scotland’s Futures Forum Ltd, as suggested in option 3, have already been rehearsed in the letter from the Forum’s Board. Dissolving the company would effectively be writing-off previous years investment both in money and in the considerable effort to develop futures thinking in political and policy debate. Undoubtedly, winding-up the Forum would result in a monetary saving for 2011/12 but it should be noted, as with the other 2 options, up to £18,000 wind-up costs will accrue, up to June 2011, principally in returned money to existing Champions who support the Forum over a 4 year period.

Publication Scheme

13. This paper may be published following SPCB consideration.

Decision

14. The SPCB is invited to note the comments and views of the Board of Directors of Scotland’s Futures Forum and to consider the options outlined above.

Scotland’s Futures Forum
February 2011
SCOTLAND’S FUTURES FORUM

Scotland’s Futures Forum’s Board of Directors is aware that the SPCB is currently engaged in a resource planning exercise. In response to the SPCB request for the views of the Forum’s Board, and on their behalf, I provide below information which you and your colleagues may find useful when considering the Forum as part of this exercise.

My Board fully recognise that, as sole ‘Member’ of the company, the SPCB will want to look at the costs associated with the Forum and consider whether their financial contribution could be better spent. However, it is the view of the Board, that the Forum has established itself as valuable resource at Holyrood and it is worth rehearsing some of the outcomes and outputs of the Forum over the last year.

Supporting MSPs and the Parliament

We know that over the last 12 months 17 MSPs have attended at least one Forum event. In addition to this, the Forum has held futures workshops to support parliamentary Committees on 5 separate occasions. We estimate that over 30 political researchers have also attended forums along with a number of corporate staff, particularly from SPICe. In addition to this the Forum regularly sends MSPs and Committees written reports, papers, briefings and evidence on futures related issues.

We know that the Forum’s recommendations and methodologies have also been used by the Scottish Government and UK Government Departments and by a range of other Scottish organisations. The Forum has successfully managed to stimulate public policy and political debate, challenging MSPs and policy makers to consider the longer term approaches to specific issues. We know from recent evaluation that 93% of those who attended our year long ‘Questioning the Future’ seminar series with the Scottish Government, thought the events were worthwhile with 87% of respondents polling for more ‘forums’ and futures events in the future.
The Forum’s wide-ranging membership includes business representatives, academics, the third sector, public and international organisations. Feedback from many of our Members suggests that people see the Forum as an important and valuable intermediary organisation that can bring politicians together with experts and the wider public on a range of important issues.

The Forum has also been successful in debating emerging science and research to come from Scottish Universities – something which is valued by the academic community and many MSPs. The increasingly influential Insight Institute, made up of 6 Scottish Universities has invited the Forum to develop a Memo of Understanding to continue this work into 2011 as has the education charity and think tank, the Goodison Group in Scotland.

It is the view of my Board that all of this work is important and worthwhile. Moreover, given the modest financial resources available to it, the Forum offers real value for money.

**The Way Forward and Funding**

However, the SPCB will understandably want to look at the Forum to consider its aims and whether it can be sustainable in a period of budgetary constraints.

One option open to the SPCB is to simply wind-up the company. My Board are keen to express the view that maintaining the company itself costs very little. There is also a reputational risk from winding up the company; it might appear odd to some that during a period of great uncertainty the Parliament might wind-up its futures capacity. There is also a sense that by simply winding up the company we would effectively be writing off investment from previous years.

Perhaps more of an issue is the level of SPCB funding for the Forum. The Board has now reflected on the view that the SPCB contribution may be better spent by ‘buying-in' futures expertise from external bodies, as and when needed by Committees.

My Board are of the clear view that this can be achieved by adapting how the Forum operates, at a reduced cost, whilst protecting the company, Scotland’s Futures Forum Ltd.

The SPCB and Finance Committee had previously agreed a budget of £92,000 for the Forum in 2011/12. However, if the SPCB was minded to provide more limited funding of £40,000 for 2011/12, that would allow the Forum to be maintained, complete outstanding commitments, undertake ad-hoc work for Committees and provide time to work up new proposals for the new SPCB. This would also leave the remaining £52,000 from the initial agreed budget which could be used to develop collaborative / commissioned work, if the new SPCB thought that was worthwhile.
My Board would be keen to bring forward detailed plans to the new SPCB on how these new collaborations might work, in June 2011.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, one of the key reasons for establishing the Forum as a ‘company Ltd by guarantee’, back in 2005, was to ensure it was able to operate in different formats; whatever suited the SPCB and MSPs at any particular time. For example, in the past the Forum has operated as a Committee, as a research unit, it has worked as a genuine ‘forum’, a think-tank, and as a network. My Board’s strong view is that the Futures Forum is a valuable resource and regardless of the level of SPCB funding for 2011/12, it should be protected as a company for the next Parliament. It further believes that the Forum’s business model can be adapted to offer greater value for money and operate more as a broker between Committees and external research bodies should the next Corporate Body wish it to be so.

I hope this information is useful to you and your colleagues in considering Scotland’s Futures Forum. I am happy to provide you with any further information you would find helpful.

Robert Rae
Director