



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Conveners Group

Agenda

1st Meeting, 2021 (Session 6) Wednesday 29 September 2021

The group will meet at 12.30pm in Committee Room 2

1. **Introduction to Conveners Group**
2. **Meetings with the First Minister**
3. **AOB**
4. **Next meeting details**

The papers for this meeting are as follows –

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1 | Conveners Group Introductory Paper | CG/S6/21/1/1 |
| 2 | Meetings with the First Minister | CG/S6/21/1/2 |
| 3 | Verbal contributions from Conveners | (No paper) |

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Conveners Group

1st Meeting, 2021 (Session 6), Wednesday 29th September 2021

Introduction to Conveners Group

Introduction

1. The Conveners Group is a forum where Committee Conveners meet to take a strategic view on the operation of committees and to facilitate liaison between the Committees, the Parliamentary Bureau and the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body.
2. It consists of the Convener of each subject and mandatory committee and the Presiding Officer. Although in practice, the Presiding Officer has delegated her authority to Liam McArthur, Deputy Presiding Officer, to chair CG meetings on her behalf.

Role of Conveners Group

3. [Chapter 6A](#) of Standing Orders provides its role in relation to the operation of committees. Regular duties of the Conveners Group include:
 - making recommendations to the Bureau on Committee business to be scheduled in the Chamber
 - approval of Committee meetings outside Edinburgh
 - approval of travel by Committees or Committee members outside the UK

Strategic role

4. In addition to its regular duties, the Group also has an influential role to play in raising the profile of committees. The Commission on Parliamentary Reform¹ recommended, amongst other things, that the Conveners' Group takes a greater role in developing a more strategic approach to scrutiny across committees.
5. The Group could consider developing a strategic role to proactively champion committee scrutiny opportunity and address scrutiny challenges. It may therefore wish to consider whether it could enhance this role through being the 'voice' of committees. This could include ensuring the prominence

¹ <https://www.parliament.scot/abouttheparliament/110277.aspx>

of committee business and the representation of committee capacity in relation to the legislative process.

6. One area where this could be achieved is in ensuring parity of esteem of committee business with chamber business. In its legacy report the previous Group recognised that the relationship between committees and other aspects of parliamentary business significantly impact on committees' effectiveness. In particular, the impact of scheduling of chamber business on the work of committees (in particular, the impact on committees which meet on a Thursday morning).

7. To help achieve this parity of esteem, the Group recommended that its successor may wish to seek a means for committee interests to be represented at the Parliamentary Bureau. One option would be for the Convener of the Group, who as DPO attends meetings of the Bureau, to be authorised to carry out this role.

8. The Session 5 Conveners Group [Legacy Report](#) also highlights a number of issues which were considered by the Group and makes some recommendations for the successor Group.

9. For the first meeting of the Group, the Convener has asked individual committee conveners to each contribute their views on how the Group wishes to develop its strategic role. To aid this discussion, the main issues from the Legacy Report are discussed below.

Cross-cutting issues

10. The previous Group recognised the significance of the scope of committee remits on the ability of committees to scrutinise effectively. It also recognised that policy scrutiny is becoming increasingly complex and issues do not necessarily always fall within the remit of one committee. One of the biggest challenges for the Parliament is how it achieves scrutiny coherence, and how it can effectively hold the Scottish Government to account on complex and linked policy areas.

11. In order to facilitate scrutiny of complex and systemic issues, there is a need to consider collaborative work between committees. The Conveners Group has a key role to play in facilitating this approach. It may therefore wish to explore ways to encourage and promote such an approach to the scrutiny of cross-cutting issues.

Session-wide issues

12. There are many issues which will fall across many committee remits throughout this session. Particular examples of cross-cutting work include the impact of the UK leaving the EU on devolution and also in relation to net zero. These issues will clearly impact on a range of remits.

13. Discussions have already begun between the Convener of the Net Zero, Environment and Transport (NZET) and the Conveners of committees on which net zero issues will likely have the greatest impact.

14. EU exit issues are also clearly very complex while new scrutiny systems are established following the UK's departure. The Convener of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee (CEEAC) has written to all subject committees, as well as the Convener of Conveners Group, providing guidance on scrutiny of impact of the UK internal market on devolved policy areas. The Convener also noted that responsibility of the impact of the new constitutional arrangements on particular subject areas will be responsibility of the relevant committee.

15. It is not intended for any work by CG on cross-cutting issues to undermine the individual committees carrying out this scrutiny work. Instead it is intended that the Group's input will complement this work. Consideration should therefore be given to where value can be added through consideration of these matters on a collective, cross-committee basis.

16. One approach would be for CG to coordinate this work, providing a forum for consideration of approaches to joined-up scrutiny in these complex areas as well provide an overview of this approach to these issues.

17. For example, the Convener of the CEEAC Committee is seeking early discussion with CG on the issues raised in the guidance in order to achieve a consistent and joined up approach to this scrutiny work. The Convener also proposes an option of inviting representatives from the Finance and Constitution Committee's legacy expert to speak to the Group.

18. The CG legacy report also highlighted the benefits of inter-parliamentary working between Scottish Parliament committees and their counterparts in other UK legislatures. This is an area that could be explored further this session.

Specific policy scrutiny

19. Cross-committee working is also regularly required in relation to scrutiny of time-limited items of business. For example, where a bill engages the remits of more than one committee.

20. Standing Orders allow for lead and secondary committees to be designated and as a minimum this has involved any secondary committees reporting to the lead committee on the areas within the bill relevant to their remits.

21. While this approach will continue to apply, the Group may wish to consider whether there are ways to enhance this scrutiny work.

22. For example, the committees involved may wish to consider commissioning joint research or participate in joint deliberative engagement

events. Similarly, joint committee inquiries were successfully carried out in the previous session. This could be extended to legislative work.

23. One option might be for CG to consider the Programme for Government and identify, say, one bill that is examined in a more holistic way. Other options might include the Group deciding, collectively, that there was a piece of post-legislative scrutiny that might be considered on a more collegiate basis by Members spanning the traditional committee structures.

24. The Group is invited to consider its approach to cross-cutting issues.

25. Following on from initial discussion, it is proposed that officials bring back a more detailed paper illustrating successful examples of joint working and putting forward possible approaches to the different types of cross-cutting work that CG may choose to sponsor.

Issues considered in Session 5

26. Set out below are examples of some of the work the Conveners Group took forward during Session 5.

Adoption of a strategic approach

27. A number of committees adopted strategies at the outset of Session 5 as a means to establish (and communicate) their public policy priorities and also to create a transparent framework to inform work-planning discussions.

28. Conveners also highlighted the importance of following up recommendations and inquiries from Session 4 or, more latterly, earlier in Session 5 to maintain a focus and momentum on previous work.

29. The previous Conveners Group recommended that all committees should take steps to establish a strategic plan for Session 6, both for reasons of transparency and also to create a transparent framework to inform future prioritisation decisions.

30. Committees were invited to follow this approach at their business planning days during the summer recess.

31. Individual conveners may wish to comment on their initial work on following this type of approach, recognising that it is still very early days.

Commission on Parliamentary Reform

32. Much of the Group's business during the last session related to implementing Committee-related recommendations made by the Commission on Parliamentary Reform. This included issues such as public participation and external engagement and support for the creation of the Committee

Engagement Unit (now the Participation and Communities Team (PACT), and good practice for committee consultations.

Witness Diversity

33. The Group has also previously considered how witness diversity data can be collected and approaches to improve diversity. The Covid-19 pandemic provided Committees with greater opportunities to take evidence from all across of Scotland and further afield. Work was taken forward in this area in session 5 with the Group supporting the publication of SPICe research on gender representation and diversity of committee witness panels. This is an area of work which would benefit from further consideration this session as part of the Parliament's wider equalities agenda.

34. The Group may want to consider taking an active, leadership role on witness diversity. Further information can be brought forward to a future meeting.

Meeting time and format

35. It is important to find a time for the Conveners Group meeting which allows as many members as possible to attend on a regular basis. The quorum of the Group is five members representing three parties (not including the convener).

36. It is proposed that the group meets at 12.30pm on the last Wednesday of each month in this session, as a general rule.

37. The group meets in private, with the exception of its meetings with the First Minister, which are usually held in public and broadcast.

38. The Group also publishes its papers in line with the SPCB's commitment to transparency.

Recommendation

39. The Conveners Group is invited to consider the issues set out in this paper.

**Irene Fleming
Clerk to the Conveners Group**

Conveners Group

1st Meeting, 2021 (Session 6), Wednesday 29th September 2021

Meetings with the First Minister and Minister for Parliamentary Business

Background

1. The Conveners Group has had regular meetings with the First Minister over a number of sessions. In its [Legacy Report](#), the previous Conveners Group recommended that the Session 6 Group continue to meet with the First Minister to hold the Scottish Government to account on public policy issues that are of interest to the work of Committees.
2. The Group recognised the importance of these meetings for providing a forum to hold the Government to account and for raising the profile of the work of Committees. The meetings also provide an opportunity to draw together policy issues across a number of Committee remits.
3. This paper seeks Conveners' views on continuing to hold such meetings and the frequency and format of these sessions.

Meeting frequency and format

4. In the last session, the Conveners Group generally held two annual formal evidence sessions with the First Minister, focusing largely on the programme for Government from the perspective of each Committee.
5. Previously, each Convener was given the opportunity to question the First Minister on something in the Programme for Government and time allowing, other Conveners were brought in with supplementary questions.
6. The Group recently moved to a more thematic approach to the handling of this session, where Conveners were encouraged to let the Deputy Presiding Officer know which issue they would pursue in advance, allowing questions to be grouped by theme (e.g. Covid recovery, Net-Zero, impact of Brexit, Health) and a more sustained approach to questioning.
7. These sessions usually last around 90-120 minutes and are held in public and broadcast live on SPTV.
8. Conveners Group is invited to consider whether it wishes to continue to hold such meetings.

Meeting with the Minister for Parliamentary Business

9. At its meeting in September 2020, the previous Conveners Group held a session with the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans on Committee work programmes.
10. The Group discussed areas of mutual interest in relation to the work programmes for their Committees for the remainder of the parliamentary session. The Minister responded to a range of issues, including scheduling of committee business in the Chamber.
11. Conveners Group may wish to take the opportunity to invite the Minister for Parliamentary Business to one of their meetings to discuss Committee work programmes and Committee chamber business.

Recommendations

12. **The Group is invited to consider:**
 - **whether it wishes to continue holding two annual formal sessions with the First Minister;**
 - **whether it wishes to continue taking a thematic approach to these sessions;**
 - **whether it wishes to hold the first of these sessions before the end of the year, allowing time for Conveners to liaise with their Committees over the Programme for Government and any questions they may wish to ask; and**
 - **whether it wishes to invite the Minister for Parliamentary Business to attend a future meeting to discuss committee work programmes and the scheduling committee business in the chamber.**

Irene Fleming
Clerk to the Conveners Group