The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Tim Eagle MSP
MSP for Highlands and Islands Region

SPPA Committee
The Scottish Parliament
EH99 1SP

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Dear Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee,

As you know, I am my party's business manager, while also sitting as a member of this committee. I am therefore recusing myself from taking part in the business manager panel so that I can fully take part in the committee's work on chamber business rules.

As discussed, I attach written evidence setting out the views of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party on the Presiding Officer's changes to the weekly schedule.

After discussion with the group, the majority are agreed that the splitting of FMQs into Tuesday and Thursday has not achieved the best result. While MSPs wanted to applaud the Presiding Officer for trying something new, the overall feeling is that the parliamentary week has lost its topical slot, and that FMQs would work better as one longer, earlier session on Thursdays.

Our main proposal is to replace Tuesday's backbench FMQs with a Topical Questions session, drop the second General Questions session on Thursday, and hold a single hour of FMQs from 1pm on Thursday, opening with party leaders. We think this brings topicality back to the week while respecting the time committees need on Thursdays.

Annex A covers the group's views on the above and the other changes.

Kind regards,

Tim Eagle

Tim Eagle MSP
Member of the Scottish Parliament
Highlands and Islands Region

Annex A: Scottish Conservative & Unionist Party full response to SPPA Committee on temporary changes to chamber business

MEETING TIMES

Do you have any comments on the changes to meeting times?

1. The group has no strong view either way on the later end to chamber business on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, or on the Presiding Officer's discretion over the timing of Decision Time.

2. On Thursdays, our members recognise that committees need more of the morning than last session's 11.40am cut-off allowed, and we don't want to take that time away from them. The 2pm start to FMQs is later than members would like, though. Our proposal at paragraphs 10 to 12 would bring FMQs forward, while still giving committees their Thursday mornings.

FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTIONS

Do you have any comments on the changes to First Minister's Questions?

Separate sessions for party leaders and backbench MSPs

3. After discussion with the group, the majority are agreed that splitting FMQs between Tuesday and Thursday has not achieved the best result.

4. Our MSPs don't think Tuesday's backbench FMQs is working and there is a view that the media pay it little attention. It has come at the cost of Topical Question Time (see paragraph 13).

5. The format is part of the problem. The First Minister is answering on every portfolio at once, so he tends to give a general reply rather than the detail a cabinet secretary would have to hand. Each member gets one answer and no follow-up, so a non-committal answer is the end of the matter.

6. Our members accept that more parties in the chamber means a longer FMQs session. Splitting it across two days hasn't helped, though. We would rather have a single hour-long session on Thursday, opening with party leaders and moving straight to backbenchers, so that backbench questions are asked while the press gallery is still watching.

No longer lodging and publishing backbench questions in advance

7. We understand why backbench questions are no longer lodged in advance, and nobody in our group wants to go back to scripted questions (and answers). The concern is that the First Minister can give a single answer and move on to the next member, without providing adequate detail.

8. We are not proposing extra follow-up questions for backbenchers at Thursday FMQs at this stage, as we would want to see our Topical Questions proposal (paragraph 10) played out, hopefully allowing members to have a proper chance to question the responsible minister forensically. However, we would propose revisiting FMQs follow-ups in the future.

9. We invite the Committee to consider how best to deal with the First Minister giving a single answer to a backbench question and moving on.

Our proposal

10. We propose a compromise that still gives committees their Thursday mornings: (a) replace Tuesday's backbench FMQs with a 30-minute Topical Question Time, answered by the relevant minister, with the lodging member able to ask two follow-up questions as before; (b) drop the second General Questions session on Thursday; and (c) hold a single hour of FMQs on Thursday, ideally starting at 1pm, with party leaders first and backbenchers after.

11. Our preference is a 1pm start, which brings FMQs back towards the old lunchtime slot. We recognise it would mean the chamber sitting half an hour earlier on Thursdays, which may squeeze committees, so we are not wedded to it. A 1.30pm start would still be an improvement on 2pm and costs no extra chamber time: Thursday's 30 minutes of General Questions becomes the second half-hour of FMQs, and Tuesday's backbench FMQs slot becomes Topical Question Time.

12. Taken together, this puts a topical slot back into the week, gives backbench questions to the First Minister a bigger audience and brings FMQs forward, while leaving committee mornings where they are.

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONING ARRANGEMENTS

Do you have any comments on recent changes to parliamentary questioning arrangements, including the suspension of Topical Question Time and changes to Portfolio and General Questions?

Suspension of Topical Question Time

13. Suspending Topical Question Time has taken away the one slot in the week where a member could raise something in that week's news (as opposed to lodging a week in advance) and get a proper answer from the minister responsible. The lodging member had three questions in a row to the minister in charge and could keep pressing on a point that hadn't been answered. Our proposal at paragraph 10 would bring it back in place of Tuesday's backbench FMQs.

Number and timing of General Questions

14. There are now 18 General Questions a week, ten more than before, and every one of them has to be lodged by 12 noon on the Wednesday of the week before. A question asked on a Thursday can be eight days old by the time it reaches the chamber.

15. Our members would rather have fewer questions and more topical ones. The number has gone up, but the chamber has lost much of its ability to respond to the week's news. Dropping the second General Questions session on Thursday, as we propose at paragraph 10, would bring the number back down.

Urgent Questions

16. Urgent Questions exist to fill exactly this gap, but they appear to be rejected wholesale this session.

17. We would ask for Urgent Questions to be granted more readily, especially while the week has no topical slot.

Swapping questions

18. The group has no strong view either way on the ability to swap questions with other members.

REMOTE PARTICIPATION

Do you have any comments on remote participation arrangements?

19. The group has no strong view either way on the requirement for Presiding Officer permission to vote remotely from outside the UK.

POINTS OF ORDER, INTERVENTIONS AND MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Do you have any comments on these changes?

20. The group would like clarity on the Point of Order changes, to confirm whether official guidance counts as a nameable procedure when raising one, as well as Standing Orders rules. We believe it should, but we have heard conflicting reports from the chair.

21. There is strong support for the automatic protection of time taken by interventions. It rewards members who take interventions and makes for better debate. Members have noticed, however, that the Deputy Presiding Officers don't apply it consistently. This has been witnessed several times, but notably on 4 November 2026 where interventions were denied by the Deputy Presiding Officer who said the member had run out of time.

22. We would ask for a common approach from the chair, so that intervention time is protected in the same way whoever is presiding and for the Deputy Presiding Officers to be briefed properly on the rules.

23. Members also welcome the reduction in the number of parties required to support a Members' Business debate, and allowing events and cross-party group meetings during Members' Business debates. Both make life easier for members and for the organisations and visitors they work with.