



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

The Presiding Officer

Martin Whitfield MSP
Convener
Standards Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

By email

20 November 2023

Dear Convener

Throughout the years since 1999, the Parliament has reflected on how it operates and has revised its procedures where necessary. Your Committee has a key role in ensuring that we continue to do so. As Presiding Officer, I am committed to doing all that I can to support the Parliament's development and to facilitate effective scrutiny.

Half-way through this session, and as we approach the Parliament's 25th anniversary year, I have been reflecting on the parliamentary question times across the week. My role in chairing the Parliament and in considering all questions that are submitted for selection for Topical Questions, First Minister's Questions and Urgent Questions allows me a unique overview.

My aim is to ensure that, every day the Parliament is sitting, Members have the opportunity to raise the most significant issues of the day and that the Parliament can be as responsive as the public expects. That is why I have selected Urgent Questions wherever appropriate, and have taken steps to encourage concise questions and answers at First Minister's Questions and other question times so that as many Members as possible have the chance to raise their questions.

I believe that there is yet further scope to increase flexibility and topicality in our question sessions to achieve that aim. A couple of examples may be helpful to illustrate the issues.

Topical Questions is an important opportunity at the start of the business week to put questions on significant issues that have arisen since the Parliament last met. The Monday morning deadline for these questions to be lodged means that there is no opportunity to put a question on an issue that arises after that deadline, other than by an Urgent Question. There is no opportunity on a Wednesday for questions on significant and more immediate political matters to be raised, unless they meet the criteria to be selected as an Urgent Question. While the opportunity to lodge Urgent Questions is an important one, I am conscious that taking an Urgent Question involves a change to the agreed programme of business.

Portfolio Question Time slots provide an important opportunity for sustained scrutiny of specific policy areas. The requirement on members to submit names and lodge questions well in advance, and the fact that each portfolio appears only every third week, means that these question times do not necessarily provide the opportunity to raise more immediate issues of the day.

In considering any alternative approaches to question times for the Parliament, I am mindful of the need for the parliamentary week to balance time for debates that allow an issue to be explored in depth and time for scrutiny through questions. And I am mindful that effective scrutiny can be achieved by a combination of questions that are published in advance so that answers can be researched and prepared and questions that are raised spontaneously.

I have not set out a specific proposal here, but I am committed to considering all avenues that will help ensure that every Member of this Parliament has the opportunity to best represent their constituents, their interests and the issues that are important to them.

I would be grateful if the committee would consider these issues as part of its forthcoming work. I would be happy to discuss this further with you and the Committee and to provide any further information that might be helpful.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alison Johnstone". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP
Presiding Officer