



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

**The Presiding Officer**

Martin Whitfield MSP  
Convener  
Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee  
The Scottish Parliament

**12 December 2025**

Dear Convener

**Responsiveness of Parliamentary Question Times**

As you know, 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 and the issues that are important to them. Throughout this session, I have sought to use the powers available to me under Standing Orders to maximise the opportunities that all Members have to hold the Scottish Government to account on behalf of their constituents.

To this end, I have selected Urgent Questions wherever appropriate, and have taken steps to encourage more 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. Thanks to Members' positive engagement, considerable progress has been made in that regard.

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.

It is my strong view that there is further scope to increase flexibility and topicality in our question sessions to achieve that aim. I therefore wrote to the Committee in November 2023 to ask it to consider these issues as part of its work programme.

In February 2025, you indicated that the Committee was considering these issues and we subsequently met to discuss some ideas for improving the responsiveness of question times.

I believe that there is a strong case for the Parliament to consider the following changes.

## **Replace Topical Questions with a ‘Daily Questions’ session at the start of business on a Tuesday and Wednesday**

The current arrangements for Topical Questions mean that any significant issues that arise on a Monday after 12 noon, or on a Tuesday or a Wednesday, can likely be raised only by submitting an Urgent Question.

I believe it is important for the Parliament to have a scheduled session each day it sits where the most important issues of the day can be raised. Topicality on a Thursday is generally satisfied by the opportunity for supplementaries at First Minister’s Questions. Up to 30 questions are put at First Minister’s Questions each week, only three or four of which are selected and published in advance. So the session provides a significant opportunity for Members to raise the important issues of the day. Continuing to encourage more concise questions and responses will maximise the number of supplementaries that I can take.

That opportunity does not currently exist on a Tuesday or Wednesday. I believe that, on a Tuesday and Wednesday, business should begin with a short session during which Members can request to speak to raise, without notice or prior selection, a question on any issue. As with supplementaries at First Minister’s Questions, it would be open to Members to email me with an indication of the issue they wish to raise.

My aim in chairing the session would be to allow the most significant issues of the day to be raised and to provide Members across the Chamber with an opportunity to be called. Members will be permitted a question and one supplementary each. As is normal, they can be answered by any Cabinet Secretary or Minister. Introducing this session would improve overall responsiveness in our parliamentary week.

The opportunity for Urgent Questions would remain.

## **Adjusting deadlines for lodging Portfolio and General Questions**

Portfolio and General Questions play an important role in allowing issues to be flagged in advance to allow preparation of substantive answers and to allow other Members to prepare to ask supplementaries. The current deadlines require submission of names by 12 noon on a Monday, and then submission of questions by 12 noon on a Wednesday, to be asked the following Wednesday or Thursday.

I believe these deadlines could be shorter, creating the potential for questions to be more topical while still allowing time for substantive answers to be prepared.

## **Introduce a ‘Free Questioning’ period in Portfolio Questions sessions**

Reducing the deadlines as suggested above may help Portfolio Questions sessions be more topical and responsive. However, advance lodging deadlines still create the possibility that, on the afternoon that portfolio questions are being put to the relevant Minister, there is no opportunity to ask about something significant on that subject area that has arisen since the deadline.

I propose that the number of questions drawn for each portfolio could be reduced, potentially to five, to leave the last 10 minutes of each portfolio session for topical questions relating to the portfolio. I would propose that any Member may press to

request to put one question in this 10-minute period. The Presiding Officer in the chair will seek to ensure opportunities for Members across the Chamber to be called.

I believe that these adjustments would have a strengthening effect on scrutiny, improving flexibility and enhancing the Parliament's ability to respond to key developments.

In your letter of February 2025, you suggested that the Committee was interested in the opportunity to pilot some changes. A pilot of these changes before the end of this session could help inform decisions about procedures for Session 7.

I would be grateful if the Committee would give urgent consideration to these issues. I would warmly welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee as soon as possible to discuss these issues.

In the meantime, I intend to continue to use the flexibility available to me to maximise the opportunities for Members to raise the most significant issues of the day.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Alison Johnstone". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first name "Alison" is written in a slightly larger, more prominent script than the surname "Johnstone". The signature is positioned above a thin horizontal line.

**Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP**  
**Presiding Officer**