

Summary of responses received from the SPPA Committee Citizen Space Survey of MSPs

The survey was conducted between 31 March and 29 April 2022. 24 responses were received.

Q2 – Impact of hybrid meetings on debate and parliamentary scrutiny.

The majority of respondents believed that hybrid had been a positive in allowing for parliament to continue throughout the pandemic. However, responses to the direct question on the impact on debate and scrutiny were largely negative. Too many scripted interventions – from SG and MSPs – as well as the difficulty to make effective and timely interventions were the most common complaints. A couple of respondents also commented on the need for better behaviour/culture during hybrid debates as “heckling” in the Chamber made it difficult for those participating remotely to hear and follow the debate.

Even though the proposed new system that would allow for better interventions during debates was warmly welcomed, many members commented that there was no substitute for in-person debates.

Q3&4 – Views on whether there should be a continuation of hybrid meetings both in Chamber & committee and if so under what circumstances

Almost universal opinion that hybrid should remain an option in the future for both Chamber and Committees, albeit there was a sliding scale on how it should be used. Some commented that both Committee and Chamber business should always be available virtually for all members, others that there should be proscribed reasons (long-term illness, maternity/paternity/adoption leave, bad weather). Only 2 respondents commented that there should be no hybridity, or that it should cease when the pandemic was finished.

The positive benefits from hybridity were based around the increase of accessibility of the Parliaments. For MSPs the additional flexibility helped those who are geographically distant, those with young families, caring responsibilities or disabilities. Many members commented on the ability to attract a wider range and greater diversity of witnesses to give evidence at Committee meetings. The reduced need for travel was also viewed as being complimentary to the Parliament’s climate change policy.

Notes of caution were made about the potential for negative perceptions from the public and to ensure there was no additional pressure put on members to return to work early from illness or other long-term leave.

Q5 – Under what circumstances should MSPs be able to participate virtually in parliamentary meetings?

As set out above the majority felt that some form of hybridity should remain an option, with many feeling that members participating in debates should be physically in the Chamber.

Just over half of the respondents commented there should be a list of 'valid reasons' for MSPs to participate virtually. Suggested criteria included illness, family commitments, geographical distant. However, there was no consensus on who should manage this (party whips, PO)

Q6 – Should the circumstances in which Ministers attend be the same as for MSPs?

A slim majority of respondents commented that Ministers should always be physically present in Chamber or in Committee. Some of these were very clear that this was a 'red line'.

Those who commented that there should be equality between Ministers and MSPs suggested different rules could lead to some members never being able to be ministers due to their personal circumstances. This was viewed as unfair.

Q7 – Should virtual voting continue?

Almost universal agreement that virtual voting has been a positive development and that it should continue. Many commented that the app needed to be improved as it could be cumbersome.

Q8 – Proxy voting

This did not illicit strong views either way. Some members thought that it may have a role in exceptional circumstances (long-term illness), while others thought that the pairing system was sufficient. However many members commented that they would be open to pilot proxy voting.

Q9 – Any other procedural improvements that you would like to see?

Common themes to emerge:

- More authority to the PO to get government to answer questions. A feeling that ministers gave long answers to use up time and didn't answer the questions directly. This didn't allow for good scrutiny.
- The need to combat the number of 'spurious' and 'inappropriate' uses of Points of Order
- Desire for more time to be given for interventions in debates. Some members commented that the current system 'limits' the ability to debate
- That MSPs needed to have the safety of privilege in Chamber to ensure they can speak 'freely'

Other issues mentioned:

- Ensure platform for remote voting and/or remote participation works on mobile phones
- Alter the business to allow for Plenary all day on Thursday
- Allow a slot for Topical Questions
- Scrap lodged questions at FMQs
- Share across all parties the order of speakers
- Do not suspend time of Opposition days, Committee debates or Members' business
- Strengthen the power of Conveners and Committees
- Do not allow the whipping of members in Committees
- Devise SO's to hold emergency debates
- Relax the SO's regarding the uses of Substitutes
- Provide Chamber time to explore ideas, i.e. no Questions or government statements

