

## COVID-19 UPDATE

### Executive summary

1. The Scottish Parliament continues to fulfil its unique legislative, scrutiny and representative role as part of the country's governance. As part of the Critical National Infrastructure, we have remained open at Holyrood throughout the pandemic to undertake essential parliamentary business.
2. To do so in a safe and sustainable manner SPCB has adopted a range of changes to our policies and activities, taking account of public health advice and Regulations. This paper provides advice on Parliamentary activities as we plan for the remaining 3 months of the current Session. This includes work to phase back towards our normal operations as soon as it is safe to do so.
3. This paper also advises SPCB on the new travel restrictions which provide a different regulatory framework, in legislation, from what has gone before. For reassurance we are satisfied with the current advice, issued from the Presiding Officer, on travel to undertake essential parliamentary business. However there have been a range of queries about the different types of travel and we recommend that we update the current guidance to Members and SPCB managers so that they are reassured, understand and can satisfy themselves that they have considered the strategic framework and the travel restrictions in their decision-taking.
4. Running business throughout the 9 months of the pandemic has required significant investment and change to our operations at quick pace and with a much-reduced staffing capacity. SPCB will be aware that we have had to pause certain operations, redeploy staff to priority areas and find ways to meet extra pressures within the budget. We are therefore proposing that:
  - Whilst not normal or desirable, our current way of delivering business is safe and stable, and our current planning assumption is that we maintain existing services until end March 21 when parliamentary business concludes.
  - Based on the likely public health situation; capacity to support a significant parliamentary business schedule; and work in readiness for session 6, that our current planning assumption is that face to face public engagement remains paused until after the election.
  - However, we continue to actively monitor the public health situation and plan for how we return to full Parliament operations, including public engagement, as soon as it is safe and feasible to do so.

### Planning Assumptions for current Parliamentary operations

5. The current configuration of our operations is geared towards ensuring essential Chamber and Committee business can take place. To do so SPCB has taken strategic decisions on pausing some services, redeploying staff for the medium term, new technologies and putting in extensive health protection measures at Holyrood.

6. SPCB has also taken strategic resourcing decisions and as we near the end of the financial year we are more constrained in terms of available budget and therefore flexibility. Current operations are more resource intensive; especially supporting virtual and hybrid parliamentary business. The investment to maintain safety on site, and to also have the flexibility to scale back towards normal services remains significant.
7. It is likely that once a vaccination programme and potentially a more comprehensive testing programme is well underway (reported as possibly summer 2021) that we will be in a good position to move towards the full range of parliamentary activity. We are now starting to plan for how we will do this, including any changes to Parliamentary activities and services that might arise from the current experience.

**We recommend SPCB's current planning assumption is that we maintain our current set of service levels, until the end of March 2021 to ensure focus on safely and sustainably delivering parliamentary business.**

#### **Reassurance and advice on the new travel restrictions**

8. As noted Parliament has been carrying out a critical national role throughout the pandemic. We do not expect the travel restrictions to substantially impact what we are doing currently in terms of Members and staff travelling to Holyrood to support essential parliamentary business.
9. In this section we are advising SPCB on our analysis of the Regulations and recommending we update existing guidance for Members and SPCB managers so that it accurately reflects the current position. We have received queries from Members and their staff about the travel restrictions which go beyond essential parliamentary business at Holyrood. We can provide broad advice, but it is for individuals to interpret this in each unique situation.
10. Whereas in lockdown we had a blanket travel ban, and then advisory guidance generally restricting non-essential travel, the newly introduced Regulations around travel prohibit people travelling into and out of Level 3 and 4 areas. Levels are allocated to local authority areas depending on a matrix of risk factors, are kept under review and updated as the risk profile of each area changes. Given the pan-national character of the Parliament it is likely that some Members, their staff and SPCB staff and contractors will be affected by the travel restriction from time to time depending on the level allocated to Edinburgh and to their place of residence. As advised before to Members there is a list of "reasonable excuses" to travel restrictions, including that a person can enter or leave a Level 3 or Level 4 area for the purpose of work where it is not possible for the person to work from home. In addition, Members can also take wellbeing concerns into account in determining if it is possible to work from home or not.
11. As stated we do not expect the travel restrictions to substantially impact what we are doing currently. However, this new "not possible to work from home" test means that some of our existing guidance will have to be updated. As well as

meeting our legal duties, our risk management approach provides a robust audit trail in the event of any incidence of the virus at Holyrood.

12. Members have already been advised to discuss with their staff whether attendance at Local Offices and Holyrood is necessary and we will provide supporting advice on the travel restrictions via our FAQs and the COVID helpline.
13. To help inform other decision-makers in the Parliament SPCB may wish to share its advice with the Business Managers and Committee Convenors (via clerks). We do not believe this will alter or reduce any essential business, but it would be a matter of good practice to do so, and may offer some reassurance, as has been the case with other advice in relation to COVID.

**SPCB is invited to note the advice on travel; to agree that SPCB guidance is updated to take account of this and to consider whether it wishes to offer advice to the Business Managers and Convenors (via Clerks) as a matter of good practice and reassurance.**

### **Public Engagement**

14. The aim of Parliament is not just to transact business. Public engagement has been a key pillar of how the Parliament operates, originating from the founding principles. Whilst there have been significant strides in online engagement, including the recent Festival of Politics, we have been reviewing the current scope to restart face to face engagement in 2021.
15. We have already considered plans for how we could reintroduce public engagement activities in a phased manner. We expect that this will require some reassurance around safety, and other public health requirements to give the public, schools etc confidence in visiting. Our plan is that we will start off with those activities focussed on Member engagement, such as small Member sponsored meetings and events, and then broaden to other visit type activities.
16. However, having considered the public health situation it seems unlikely that there will be a significant enough change in the new year to enable us to restart wider public access at Holyrood, beyond committee witnesses, as is the case at present.
17. It would also be challenging to do so based on staffing resources. As SPCB know we have had many months of reduced staffing capacity and there has been significant efforts to redeploy staff into areas of pressure. It is not possible to quickly switch staffing arrangements especially where this is supporting the business schedule.
18. In addition, we have been able to maintain the safety of everyone working at Holyrood by maintaining physical distancing and enhanced cleaning regimes, targeted at areas where people are working and mixing. The majority of staff are working from home, ensuring only those who need to, are at Holyrood. At this stage in the pandemic we do not feel it is advisable to bring more public on site whilst the focus is on maintaining safety for those who must be at Holyrood.

19. Over the recess Members will not be at Holyrood and we will be preparing Parliament for session 6. This is also an opportunity for some staff to take leave, especially those who have been working longer hours throughout the pandemic to support parliamentary activities.

**We recommend that officials continue to prepare plans for face to face public engagement to restart as soon as it is safe to do so. However, for the reasons outlined we also recommend SPCB's current planning assumption is that wider public engagement is unlikely to start until after the election. However, this will be kept under active review based on the public health situation.**

### **Resource Implications**

20. There are no budgetary implications associated with this paper.

### **Governance Issues**

21. Michelle Hegarty, Deputy Chief Executive will oversee implementation of any decisions and will take advice and support from the Covid Working Group. The SPCB will be consulted any time we have to revise current plans.

### **Publication Scheme**

22. This paper should not be published as its purpose is to enable free and frank discussion on operations at Holyrood.

### **Next Steps**

23. The Covid Working Group will ensure our risk assessments and advice is updated. HR will support senior managers on ongoing staffing redeployment.

### **Decisions**

24. In conclusion, the SPCB is asked to:

- Note the updated advice on the Strategic Framework and of the Regulations on travel restrictions.
- Agree that guidance is updated, including for Members via FAQs and the COVID helpline
- Consider offering advice to the Business Managers and Convenors (via Clerks) on the new travel restrictions as a matter of good practice and reassurance.
- Agree that our current planning assumption is that our operations remain "as is" until end March 21. This will be kept under active review.
- Agree that our current planning assumption is that wider public engagement is unlikely to start until after the election. This will be kept under active review based on the public health situation over the next few months

Michelle Hegarty  
Deputy Chief Executive  
December 2020