

Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee
Thursday 3 April 2025
5th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

Committee Effectiveness – written submission

1. This paper sets out a written submission that has been provided by Ken Hughes, former Assistant Chief Executive of the Scottish Parliament, who is participating in the roundtable discussion on the committee effectiveness inquiry.

Clerks to the Committee
April 2025

**Written submission from Ken Hughes, Former Assistant Chief Executive, The Scottish Parliament
24 March 2025**

The following offers a few thoughts on the key themes set out in the inquiry remit.

Structure

In larger parliaments the total number of members far exceeds the amount of committee places and committee membership is relatively stable. In contrast, the size and structure of the Scottish Parliament creates a greater turnover in committee members, including conveners. While received wisdom suggests that this kind of turbulence is not conducive to committee effectiveness, I am not aware of any body of evidence that identifies any deleterious effects on the quality of Scottish Parliament committee output.

In terms of how committees use their time, evidence gathering and scrutiny serve to ensure that legislation and policies are well informed and fit for purpose. Additionally, evidence sessions serve to interrogate issues of public interest. In my opinion the sheer breadth and scale of this work is undervalued. Externally, however, there is a perception that the objectivity of this work can sometimes suffer due to divisions across party lines.

I note that the current Conveners Group has set out objectives that make use of Rule 6A.2.1 to enable it to consider improvements in committee scrutiny, viz inter-committee collaboration, participation and post-legislative scrutiny. Perhaps the next CG could consider themes such as how committees balance adversarial politics with the collective desire for good scrutiny.

While it is a relatively small issue, it is arguable that framework bills place an unnecessarily heavy burden on committees' ability to use their time effectively both by lengthening inquiries and ultimately creating more subordinate legislation.

Elected Conveners

As I understand it, the premise of secret ballot convener elections by the whole parliament is that it would promote the independence of committee conveners by introducing an element of competition and reduce the influence of party whips. In turn, this would bolster the role of convener and foster objective scrutiny.

I think it is important to firstly acknowledge that effective scrutiny is the responsibility of every committee member: this culture may be especially important in preserving continuity in times of membership turnover.

While obviously not a reason to reject the concept of elected conveners, the committee may wish to consider the impact of introducing an additional procedure at what is a very busy and time-critical period for the newly elected parliament. That said, the Welsh model whereby elections are held only if the convener nomination is opposed could be a less onerous process.

Evaluation

It is self evident that if a committee, or any other scrutiny body, continually made recommendations that were disregarded, its effectiveness would be called into question. It should follow that tracking acceptance rates is an essential, if quantitative, evaluation tool.

Qualitative evaluation is a more difficult proposition for committees. There may not be a direct correlation between, for instance, the quality of committee reports and how effectively their recommendations are implemented. A way forward would perhaps be to commission research that followed up committee work in one or two specific areas per annum. Public participation feedback should also be used as a measure of success.

Conversely, one-off evidence sessions on topical issues of public interest are a matter of public record. The OR and Scottish Parliament TV stands testament to their success.

The parliament has tended to cite capacity and time pressures as the biggest barriers to allowing committees to reflect on their performance. Informal committee awaydays, that are usually held during summer recess, possibly present the best opportunity to track success. Could devoting an entire weeks' parliamentary business to committee meetings, say on an annual basis, create similar opportunities for committees by creating room for a mixture of both formal meetings and informal meetings? Structuring committee business in this way would not be without precedent.

Lastly, Rule 12.9 requires committees to produce annual reports of their activities. While the reports focus largely on inputs, they could nevertheless provide an opportunity to consider and record committee success.