



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

The Presiding Officer

Martin Whitfield MSP
Convener
Standards, Procedures and Public
Appointments Committee

7 June 2022

Dear Convener

SPPA Committee inquiry into Future Practices and Procedures

Thank you for your letter of 19 May seeking the SPCB's views on the future practices and procedures of the Parliament.

The SPCB discussed this matter and was interested to note the summary of key points emerging from the range of evidence you have collected so far.

As you know, we introduced our virtual and hybrid technology and infrastructure at pace as an emergency response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This allowed the Parliament and its committees to continue to meet throughout. Over time we made a series of changes that allowed Members to participate remotely in the full range of parliamentary business items, most significantly, through the introduction of the digital voting system.

You are also aware that work is ongoing to improve the hybrid platform with the intention of enabling interventions during debates regardless of whether Members participate in person or remotely. The target is that the improved platform will be operational from after the summer recess. You might want to note that parliamentary officials are currently taking steps to make Members aware of the change and to support them in using the new platform. Presentations about the new system are being offered to party groups and drop-in sessions at which it will be demonstrated will take place during June. Details of other familiarisation events and forthcoming video guides will be communicated to Members soon. The video guides will also provide advice on lighting, picture framing, backgrounds and the like. The SPCB expressed support for the introduction of appropriate standardised backgrounds.

Another benefit of the new platform is that, by making log in easier and better automating various background tasks, it will reduce the additional technical staffing support that is currently required for hybrid proceedings.

Listed below are the SPCB's comments on your various questions

- The resource required in terms of infrastructure, equipment and personnel within the Parliament for continuing to provide for and improve the virtual participation by Members in Chamber and Committee business, as well as that required by MSPs in their own offices or homes to ensure that the experience of participating virtually in parliamentary business can be as similar as possible to the experience of participating in person.
- The extent to which it is possible to move towards a position in which the systems to support virtual participation require as little additional resource as possible.

As indicated above, investment has already been made in the technology and infrastructure required to support virtual and hybrid parliamentary business. The new platform currently being prepared for use after the summer recess is designed to improve Members' experience both in the Chamber and while remoting in. Members will be able to access it using their existing equipment. BIT staff remain available to advise on home and office set up. As well as improving the nature of debate, when embedded this change will reduce the additional staff resource that has been required during the pandemic response. However, the SPCB notes it is now supporting two new parliamentary services – remote voting and the hybrid platform - and that this requires to be resourced. Work processes and staffing resources will be kept under review to ensure that the new platform is delivered in the most efficient way and that spending is proportionate to ongoing service demands or to address resiliency.

While the level of remote participation by Members in Chamber and Committee proceedings has reduced since we have been able to return to full occupancy levels, it continues to be the case that a significant proportion of Members are making use of the remote voting system. Work is also ongoing to improve that system.

- Whether there should be any constraints on the circumstances in which Members should be able to participate virtually in parliamentary proceedings and any time frames for notifying of the intention to participate virtually in light of the resource currently required to support hybrid meetings?

SPCB members consider that decisions about any constraints on the circumstances in which Members should be able to participate virtually are not a matter for us but would reiterate that system improvements will improve operational efficiency, regardless of whether there are constraints placed on its use.

- The improvement of the voting system to ensure that it is as robust and efficient as possible and that it can become an integrated system so that Members can vote using the infrastructure provided in the Chamber.

We note the evidence your committee has received on the future of remote voting. Given that Members are required to be present (either physically or virtually) in a parliamentary meeting to be entitled to vote, the continuation of remote voting is predicated on the continued ability of Members to participate remotely.

The voting system is likely to continue to require some additional staffing resource at decision times and during other voting periods. Options are being considered to introduce new infrastructure in the Chamber to allow Members to vote from equipment fitted into their desks. However, there are technical and cost issues that need to be further considered.

- The extent to which providing for the virtual participation of members promotes the resilience of the Parliament in circumstances where there is a severe weather event or the Parliament building cannot be accessed for any reason.

Parliament had previous resiliency plans for these possible risks, all of which involved some sort of physical proceedings. However, virtual and hybrid proceedings now allow an entirely new approach to be taken to resilience where the Parliament cannot be accessed, or Members cannot travel to Holyrood, and current business continuity plans are actively under review in light of these developments.

- The ways in which virtual participation contributes to the Parliament meeting its sustainable development targets.

Virtual participation by Members and witnesses can reduce emissions from traveling to and from the Parliament or external venues. Virtual participation also presents opportunities for a wider range of people to engage with the Parliament, has the potential to remove barriers to help address inequality of access and offers prospects of a better home and work life balance aiding good health and wellbeing. We have significant challenges ahead to meet our legal duties to work towards net zero and increased virtual working (whether in relation to parliamentary business or broader parliamentary and representative activity) offers a very effective tool for meeting those targets.

- The support for public engagement so that those invited to be witnesses for Committees or participate in a Committee engagement activity (or for Time for Reflection in the Chamber) are not excluded from doing so due to the inability to access the equipment to participate virtually.

We recognise that not everyone might want or be able to engage digitally with the Parliament, whether through lack of connectivity, devices or indeed knowledge and confidence. Our Participation and Communities Team always checks firstly whether people feel comfortable engaging digitally and secondly whether there are any barriers to them doing so. The team then assesses whether the Parliament can help (for example, by providing familiarisation training, lending devices or paying for data). Given the focus of the Parliament's Public Engagement Strategy is to widen access and remove barriers, the team will continue to examine whether we can do more in this and other areas to ensure we remove as many barriers as possible. Consideration will also be given to the provision of general guidance about how attendees can access facilities to engage online to alleviate the risk of digital inequality.

I hope this response is useful to your Committee's deliberations.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alison Johnstone". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'A' and 'J'.

Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP
Presiding Officer