Standards, Procedures, and Public Appointments Committee

Committee effectiveness – background and resource overview

Purpose

This paper sets out detail of the research and data sources to support the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's inquiry into Committee Effectiveness.

The paper is separated into two sections:

1. An initial briefing paper, which was published in January 2025. This paper represented a starting point to inform and support inquiry scoping. It is based on data that is in the public domain and was produced to support the Committee in agreeing its approach to evidence taking. It does not cover background detail from Scottish Parliament Standing Orders or guidance, nor does it cover [evidence taken by the Committee from former conveners in February 2024](#). The paper includes–

   - Contextual research and data around understanding committee effectiveness (Pages 2-8).

   - Research and data related specifically to the Scottish Parliament, collated by SPICe research. (Pages 9-14).

   - Research and data based on external sources and examples, collated by the Committee Adviser, Dr Danielle Beswick (Pages 15-24).

2. A follow-up paper by SPICe which builds on the January briefing. This was originally circulated to the Committee as part of its private papers for its meeting on 3 April 2025 (Pages 25-36).

3. A note on roles and expectations of committees as defined in other legislatures, prepared by Dr Beswick for the Committee's meeting on 24 April 2025 (Pages 37-38).

Initial public briefing by SPICe and Committee Adviser (January 2025)

Context – understanding effectiveness

Measures of effectiveness

1. Measuring committee effectiveness is complex. There are numerous ways in which effectiveness could be measured appropriately. Having a shared understanding of what effectiveness means and how it should be assessed is key and central to any data collection for analysis.

   - Parliamentary scrutiny (legislative, post legislative, delegated legislation, public appointments, budget and in terms of accountability/policy choices).

   - Impact (e.g., % of committee recommendations taken forward by Government), influence (e.g., how well committees communicate their message, and whether those messages are taken up by others), visibility (e.g., media pick up)[1].

   - Outputs (e.g., number of reports, how well evidence is used, number of committee debates).

   - Democratic indicators such as transparency, responsiveness, inclusiveness, diversity of witnesses and evidence and level of participation.

   - Structural and practical issues (e.g., whether committee structures are efficient, how much time is spent considering legislation/taking evidence/private discussion).

Power, Influence and Impact of Senedd Committees

2. In 2021, Professor Diana Stirbu, undertook a project to develop a framework to enable the Senedd to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of the activity of its committees. The project explored *"both conditions leading to effective committee work (features of effectiveness) and the conditions in which evaluation and assessment of effectiveness take place"*. The report, [Power, Influence and Impact of Senedd Committees](#):

   - articulates the characteristics of effective committee activity and the conditions in which evaluation and self-reflection can take place.

   - identifies appropriate measures of effectiveness across the full range of committee roles.

   - develops a comprehensive analytical and deliberative framework to assist committees in strategically planning and focusing their work; and,

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[1] Terms such as 'impact' would have to be clearly defined in any study

- considers how committees can improve the diversity of their evidence and witnesses, be more inclusive, and engage a wider range of people with their work.

3. The research took place over five months (September 2020 and January 2021), and consisted of:

- a desk-based evidence and literature review exploring the concept and measurement of effectiveness in parliamentary contexts.

- a two-stage field research consisting of 37 semi-structured interviews with politicians and officials supporting the work of committees at all levels of leadership, and three group discussions with different teams in the Senedd, followed by three collaborative workshops with Senedd officials during which participants explored shared narratives about what effective committees are and suggested ways to evidence and measure effectiveness.

- three interviews with external and international stakeholders; and,

- feed-back session with internal stakeholders to elicit further input from participants and offer in-depth feedback on the first draft.

4. The report indicated different types of evaluation which could be considered by committees to inform improvement. The evaluation was split across three areas:

1. **Committee** (supported by regular time for evaluation and timely, accessible and relevant data):

- Self-reflection and evaluation in terms of strategic goals, ways of working, communication with the public, lessons learned, impact.

- Sought consideration of stakeholders' feedback.

2. Committee **systems** (supported by comprehensive data collection with access to data available to research organisations):

- Scale, quality and impact of committees' engagement activity.

- Diversity monitoring year on year.

- Evaluation of stakeholder feedback with data on committees.

- Analysis of committees' parliamentary activity (meetings, outputs, development opportunities etc) Media and social media analysis.

3. **Independent evaluation** (supported by academic fellowships and internships supporting research and evaluation, independent commissioned research):

- Long-term policy and legislative impact of committees or particular inquiries.

- Analysis on knowledge, interest in politics and voter turnout in elections over time.

- Independent evaluation of committees' contribution to democratic process in Wales, improving governance and accountability, improving legislation and the Senedd's profile within the UK's parliamentary landscape.

5. The project saw structures, process and culture as key to supporting evaluation. Although the research highlighted the work already happening in these areas, it identified:

"a significant missing factor in current practice is the consistency between and clarity of the strategic work done at the beginning of a Senedd term and the legacy work at the end– the 'golden thread' guiding work of committees… this links strategic objectives, measures of success, sources to help evidence success, committees' activity and outputs in a process focused on improvement and long-term impact."

6. The report also set out possible measures of effectiveness for committees whilst noting that "One of the biggest hurdles in developing a coherent framework for evaluation of committees' work is that not everything can be easily quantifiable and measurable".

7. The suggested measures included:

- % of recommendations accepted and implemented by government.

- Changes in Government spending on areas highlighted by committees year on year; changes in policy and legislative priorities.

- % committee stage amendments accepted.

- % of bills getting pre and post legislative scrutiny.

- Subordinate legislation considered.

- Number of individuals taking part in committee engagement events.

- Level of online engagement in committees work.

- Positive references made about committees' work by others and stakeholder perceptions on committees' influence, impact and inclusiveness.

- Witnesses' perception of evidence gathering sessions.

- Level and quality of engagement with research-based organisations.

Effectiveness of Select Committees at the UK Parliament

8. There has been significant work on issues linked to the effectiveness of Select

Committees at the UK Parliament. Dr Marc Geddes of Edinburgh University, for example, undertook a study of how MPs and select committees use evidence in

2021-22; Dr Thomas Caygill[2] has assessed post-legislative scrutiny recommendations, and Professor Patrick Dunleavy has produced work for Democratic Audit looking at how effective the House of Commons two committee system is at scrutinising government policy making.

9. The most comprehensive and relevant recent work is perhaps the 2019 House of Commons Liaison Committee[3] report 'The effectiveness and influence of the select committee system'. The report was forward looking about the work of Committees and comprised of evidence and conclusions across seven themes:

- The work of committees.

- Select Committees and the UK's future relationship with the European Union.

- Evidence, engagement and research.

- Powers, privileges and contempts.

- Communicating work.

- Chairs and members.

- The role of the Liaison Committee.

10. The Liaison Committee recommended several changes as a result of the work. A non-exhaustive list of recommendations is provided below[4].

- Changing the core tasks of committees to include the "how" as well as the "what" of committee work and articulation of revised core tasks (see Annexe A).

- Encouraging committees to publish and consult on their strategy at the start

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[2] Dr Caygill subsequently undertook a fellowship at the Scottish Parliament on post legislative scrutiny.
[3] The House of Commons Liaison Committee is made up of all Select Committee Chairs, its work promotes effective scrutiny and considers the overall work of Select Committees.
[4] Where recommendations included matters which the Scottish Parliament has already implemented/has similar arrangements, these were excluded. For example, the Liaison Committee suggested that select committees could:

"work together to consider how policies have affected a particular section of society, across departmental boundaries. At the start of each Parliament, the Liaison Committee might usefully decide upon two or three sectors or areas of the UK and invite select committees to work together to consider the impact of government policy across departmental boundaries."

This appears similar to the strategic priorities identified by the Conveners Group.

of a Parliament, including on how the public/stakeholders can submit ideas for inquiries.

- A call for every government department to produce an annual memorandum to the relevant committee setting out the progress on implementing committee recommendations.

- Encouraged the Procedure Committee to consider "the ways in which the select committees reinforce rather than compete with the work of the plenary, and be prepared to make recommendations which would represent a step change in that settlement.".

- Steps to be taken to collect witness diversity data and encourage those giving evidence to consider diversity.

- The need for greater research, development and knowledge exchange capacity and best use of research capacity and knowledge of academic and research institutions.

- Recommendation for elected chairs to be extended to all select committees

- Gender representation on committees the Committee concluded was

  "important enough to require positive action".

11. The Liaison Committee acknowledged the importance of planning and the effect of time constraints and resources available to committees on the choices they make, stating:

    "Select committees must make choices about what they do and why. Members' time and the resources we have to support committees are limited. Thorough planning and time for follow up are likely to deliver greater impact, more time for engagement, and better use of evidence."

Research on effectiveness of Scottish Parliament Committees

12. There is limited external research on the effectiveness of Scottish Parliament committees.

13. In 2006, Professor Paul Cairney[5] carried out research to understand the influence of committees by looking at legislative amendments. The research, whilst sound in basis, can be deemed to be out-of-date in terms of measuring recent legislative amendments.

14. Professor Cairney also wrote an article in 2013 ['How can the Scottish Parliament](#) [be improved as a legislature'](#). Amongst the conclusions reached in the article were that government legislation is not scrutinised effectively, that the Parliament has insufficient staff to support committees, and that the party whip undermines independent scrutiny.

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[5] [Professor Cairney is an adviser to the Finance and Public Administration Committee](#) for its inquiry into public administration.

Commission on Parliamentary Reform

15. The [Commission on Parliamentary Reform](#) ("the Commission") explored and made several recommendations on 'More effective committees' as part of its review (which reported in June 2017). It referred in this to the report published by the [Consultative Steering Group](#) (CSG) in December 1998 which set out aspirations and recommendations for the operation of the Scottish Parliament.

16. The core of the CSG's vision was that the Scottish Parliament should have a single, elected chamber and for the day-to-day business to be carried out in committees which were to be the 'engine room' of the Parliament. These committees were to be at the heart of legislative scrutiny and of holding Government to account.

17. In its executive summary, the Commission explained that evidence suggested that at times committees had not been as effective as the CSG anticipated in holding the government to account. This was explained as being for the following potential reasons:

    - party discipline used to co-ordinate votes on legislation has been enforced during inquiries on non-legislative issues; some suggest this has hindered a committee's ability to develop cross-party consensus.

    - some committees have seen so much legislation they have been unable to develop their own agenda with fewer opportunities to hold inquiries or focus on long-term or cross-cutting issues.

    - committees have also undertaken little pre- or post-legislative scrutiny; and

    - turnover of membership has been too high and prevented the realisation of the CSG's ambition that members would develop an expertise in their subject area over the course of a parliamentary session.

18. The Commission made several recommendations aimed at supporting the independence, identity, and role of the committee system. These included that:

    - Parliament should put in place procedures for the election of conveners from the start of the next session [Session 6].

    - Whether conveners are then remunerated and/or receive additional resources for this role should be based on an objective assessment of their workloads and the expectations of their roles. This assessment should be part of a wider exercise considering additional remuneration for other parliamentary positions (such as party leaders) as referred to later in this report.

19. The Commission suggested that the following areas should be explored in relation to the election process:

    - whether all MSPs would vote in the secret ballot (for example, whether cabinet secretaries and ministers should have a vote).

- whether all committee conveners should be elected by Parliament (should any distinction be drawn between mandatory and subject committees).

- the consequences of only one candidate being nominated for election (or indeed no candidate being elected or standing for election); and

- whether this procedure should also be extended to deputy conveners.

20. On the remit and size of committee, the Commission suggested that there should ordinarily be a maximum of seven members on committees (echoing the recommendations of the Session 4 Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee in its report on Committee Reform). It recognised this would mean that some smaller parties would not be represented on some committees.

21. The Commission also recommended that Parliament should agree and make public a set of principles to inform:

- the decisions taken about the size of committees; for example, consideration might be given to larger committees where it is felt hearing all the parties' voices is important, such as in relation to constitutional issues; and

- how committee remits and names are agreed; greater transparency in this process would assist public understanding of the basis upon which committees are established.

22. After the report, changes were made around the size and remit of some committees, however recommendations on elected and remunerated conveners were not taken forward as SPPA Committee investigation found that support for this among members was found to be lacking (albeit based on low response rates to consultation with MSPs).

23. Also relating to committees, several recommendations were made around gathering evidence at a regional and community level and better resourcing committees, which led to the creation of a dedicated Committee Engagement Unit (now the Participation and Communities Team), a pioneering approach among legislatures.

24. On evaluation, the Commission did not make specific recommendations around the evaluation of committee work, however it did make recommendations about facilitating greater levels of post-legislative scrutiny. It also referenced the importance of evaluating the impact of community-based and engagement work.

Scottish Parliament related research

26. Statistics on committees are collated and published through the [SPICe annual statistics volumes](). The information on committees includes, for example, number of meetings, time spent in meetings, membership, witnesses, business (e.g., LCM consideration, inquiries, SSIs considered, petitions considered, and reports published).

27. SPICe has collated the following sample data from these statistics.

28. For the most part, detailed comparisons have been made between the current parliamentary session (Session 6) and Sessions 4 and 5. This is because of the change in session length from four to five years at the start of Session 4. Session 6 data runs up until 10 January 2025 (mid way through Year 4).

Committee membership

29. Note that there are some challenges in comparing Session 5 data to other sessions within this section because of the change in the size of four committees two years into the session, so averages have been used for that session.

30. The average turnover of members on committees through Session 6 has been 2.2 (i.e., for every committee seat, there have been 2.2 members in that seat to date this session). Of the 109 committee seats at the start of the session (excl. SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape), 37 members have remained in place throughout (noting that five of these members were on the COVID-19 Recovery Committee which disbanded in mid-2023). 11 Committees have had only one or two members present throughout the session, and only eight have kept the same convener.

31. This represents a lower rate of turnover than in Session 5 (2.5) and Session 4 (2.7), however this session is still in progress so there may be changes to come, and changes may be felt more because committees are smaller.

32. Across sessions 4-6, the committees most and least impacted by member turnover have changed from session to session. That said, Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments has always been one of the two most affected committees, and Delegated Powers and Law Reform has also been heavily impacted. These are two of the smallest committees in terms of membership.

33. The committees with the most stable membership have been less consistent, but the Justice and Economy committees have both benefited from more stable membership in two of the three sessions explored. Social Justice has been both one of the most impacted and one of the least impacted across different sessions (despite minimal changes in committee size).

Convener changes, including Conveners Group

34. There have been almost as many Convener changes to date (as at 10 January 2025) in Session 6 than there were in the entirety of Session 4, and as many Deputy Convener changes as there were in the entirety of Session 5. There were

more convener changes in Session 5 than in other sessions, however this was not reflected in Conveners Group membership as there were more instances of conveners moving between committees.

35. Based on the equivalent point in the session, there have been more MSPs who have served on Convener's Group in Session 6 than in the previous two sessions. There have been slightly more 'static' members (9), which means the turnover of other members has been slightly higher than in sessions 4 and 5. The average amount of time spent as a member of Conveners Group is similar in session 6 to session 4 (but was higher in session 5).

36. Looking at the whole session, at this stage in Session 6 there has already been as many members of CG as there were across the entirety of each of the two preceding sessions. Of the 13 members who have left Conveners Group over Session 6, eight of these have done so to take up Ministerial posts, and three to take on shadow cabinet/spokesperson roles. In most cases, these roles have not been in areas or portfolios connected to the committee convened. The wider political context is likely to play a role – there have been three First Ministers and two leaders of the Scottish Conservative Party this session after a period of relative stability.

Committee structure

37. The number of committees has fallen slightly over time when looking at subject and mandatory committees only, but it is unsurprising that there are not big changes to this number, which averages at 15.6 committees over a session, because of the relatively consistent nature of mandatory and core subject committees. What has changed is the number of Bill Committees, ad hoc committees and sub-committees, which has been at the most 11 committees in two previous sessions, and a minimum, five. At the point of this data snapshot, only one ad hoc committee had formed in Session 6 (N.B. the two COVID-19 Committees were both subject committees so are considered among core committees despite being short life). Much of this is explained by a reduction in Private Bills (not to be confused with Members' Bills), with there having been none in Session 6 compared to five in Session 5 and nine in Session 4.

38. The size of committees has changed more dramatically, creating a variation in the number of committee 'seats' across the life of the Scottish Parliament. At the most, in Session 1, there were 138 Committee seats at the start of the session, with committees having between 7-11 members. At the least, there were 96 committee seats at the end of Session 3, with almost all committees having 8 members. The number of committee seats grew again to a second peak of 132 at the start of Session 5 when most committees had 7-11 members. There are currently 109 committee seats on subject and mandatory committees, the lowest number since Session 3, and more variance in committee sizes with four 5 member committees and two 10 member committees at either end.

Committee remits

39. Tracking the remits of committees varies in simplicity – sometimes the name has much of the detail, other times the remit on establishment does. Session 5 is when remits become simplified with descriptors like "matters falling within the remit of X

cab sec" for several committees, which makes tracking secondary remits more challenging.

40. Several subjects have 'floated' around, with different pairings and lead focuses for committee. Notable are:

- Culture, which started with education, move to enterprise (economy), back to education, and finally to European.

- Sport which was paired with both education and enterprise before finding a more stable home with health.

- Housing moving between social justice, communities, infrastructure, and local government.

- Various pairings and combinations of rural, transport, environment, climate change and infrastructure.

- Climate change becoming distinct from environment.

- Justice being split across multiple committees at different times or being a single committee at others.

- Social security and communities coming in and out of prominent focus.

Committee sitting hours

41. It isn't possible to reliably include Session 1 in sitting hours as the Scottish Parliament Statistics Volume only dates back to 2001, and it should be noted that Sessions 1-3 were four-year sessions, and Sessions 5-6 were/are five year sessions which makes comparing business flow challenging beyond the first and last years.

42. In most sessions there has been a predictable trend of committee sitting hours increasing each year through the session, with some exceptions:

- Session 3, in which year 1 (2007-08) was much busier than year 2, with a build along more predictable lines from there.

- Session 5, in which year 3 (2018-19) was quieter than the year before.

- Following the move to 5-year sessions in Session 4, year 4 had fewer sitting hours than year 3.

- Year 5 of Session 5 was considerably quieter than the previous session, but this may well be largely related to being the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Session 3 and Session 6 have had far busier first years than other sessions. Session 3 could be explained by the change in government. Session 6 may reflect an established government ready to hit the ground running, but may also be affected by the quieter, covid-affected previous year and the

aftermath of Brexit.

- The devolution of further powers in Session 5 does not appear to have affected sitting hours.

43. Session 4 has been the busiest session of the Scottish Parliament so far in terms of sitting hours, by a considerable amount (a 27% increase on the Session 1-5 average). Looking at Session 6 in comparison to previous sessions by comparing years with complete data (years 1-3, sessions 2-6), it has been the busiest, especially when looking at only core committees (26% higher in sitting hours than the average across Sessions 1-6, and a 14% increase on the total for years 1-3 of Session 5).

44. Initial exploration of the 'business transacted' by committees in relation to referred work (Bills, SIs and SSIs and Memorandums) appearing on committee agendas, comparing the first two years of each session in line with the available data for the current session, Session 6 has been the session with the fewest items of business so far. The sessions with the most items are Session 2, followed by Session 5, then Session 3. Statistics suggest, conversely, that only Session 5 had more inquiries and consultations noted as transacted business in its first two years than the current session, and that the volume of petitions considered by subject committees, committee debates in the Chamber and proposed members bills are all lower than ever.

Previous Parliamentary scrutiny

45. In Session 4, the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee carried out an inquiry into committee reform, reporting in 2016. It concluded and recommended that:

- "Next session's committees should normally have a maximum of seven members.

- In proposing changes to committee membership, the Bureau should attempt to minimise turnover of members.

- We do not think that there is a case for significant changes to the way in which the remits of subject committees are decided.

- The Parliament should consider establishing two justice committees next session with different remits. If this option is trialled, our successor committee should review it after the first two years of the session.

- Within 3-5 years of Royal Assent, the Scottish Government should be required to publish a post-legislative report on the implementation of each Act of the Scottish Parliament.

- Early next session, our successor committee should review the changes made in session 4 to the structure of the Parliamentary week and consider whether they strike the right balance between Chamber and Committee time and members' constituency commitments.

- At the start of next session, discussions on working practices at committees' initial away days should include discussing the potential to use reporters. Later in the session, our successor committee should review what use is being made of reporters.

- We do not recommend that the Parliament makes any change to the current system of choosing committee conveners."

46. Specifically, on the themes that the current Committee is exploring, it said:

- "We considered whether there were other ways of organising committee remits to achieve a better balance between the workloads of different committees. We concluded that, over the course of a session, most committees manage to give time to their own inquiry priorities. This is even true in some of the most heavily-loaded legislative areas such as health and rural affairs. There are advantages in the current approach, where committee remits are broadly aligned to ministerial remits. This gives clarity about where responsibility for scrutiny lies, while allowing some flexibility. We do not therefore think that there is a case for significant changes to the way in which the remits of subject committees are decided."

- On elected conveners: "we have not heard anything in the course of our inquiry to persuade us that this is a change which would result in more effective committees or conveners."

- The report does not mention potential evaluation approaches, but it does draw attention to several committee achievements over Session 4 on the themes of "challenging government and influencing policy" and "hearing and raising people's concerns".

47. The Session 6 Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee carried out an inquiry into Public Participation in the work of the Parliament. This included running a Citizens' Panel on participation, which made 17 recommendations for the committee to consider. Of note, these included a recommendation on a 9-month deadline for feedback to participants on the outcome of any engagement, which might include inquiry outcomes. The committee agreed with this recommendation in the context of relaying how committees have used evidence. The committee also supported the panel's recommendation to institutionalise deliberative democracy and intends to lay a blueprint for how this may happen before the Parliament in time for potential changes to be made before Session 7.

48. Within committees there are ongoing examples of attempts to understand where committees had had an impact.

49. Through Session 6, the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee has produced annual tracker reports. These seek to follow key themes and priorities agreed by the committee through the session, with annual evidence gathering from stakeholders and ministers and a process of the committee assessing how much progress has been made against key aims.

50. Although only one committee takes this approach, several committees use the annual pre-budget scrutiny process to follow up on longstanding themes.

Scottish Parliament led and supported research

51. There are several examples of SPICe and SPICe-supported research which support an understanding of committee effectiveness.

52. To support the Citizen Participation and Public Participation Committee's aim of creating a blueprint for institutionalising deliberative democracy, a SPICe Fellowship with Dr Ruth Lightbody of Glasgow Caledonian University explored the core principles of deliberative democracy and created a potential framework for measuring impact. The framework references "effect on public policy and political decision-making" as one area of impact, emphasising the importance of committees understanding their own impact to support stakeholders and witnesses to see the overall impact of work.

53. A fellowship by Dr Tom Caygill (Senior Lecturer in Politics, Nottingham Trent University) reflected on the outcomes of post-legislative scrutiny undertaken in Session 5. This found that the Scottish Government had accepted 60% of the recommendations made as a result of post-legislative scrutiny inquiries and noted that committees tended to focus their recommendations on changes to policy and practice rather than legislation. Dr Caygill suggested that this "was a reflection that the legislative frameworks themselves were not necessarily problematic but that the main issue was rather how they were being implemented.". Dr Caygill highlighted that two key challenges were a lack of time and capacity to undertake scrutiny, and a lack of co-ordination across the committee system, and made several recommendations to remedy this.

54. As noted, committees often refer to long-standing issues within pre-budget scrutiny. Over the past two budget rounds, SPICe has supported a holistic and cross-cutting overview of committee pre-budget scrutiny. As well as involving a more coordinated research support approach and statistical analysis to support the Finance and Public Administration Committee in its development of guidance to committees, this has included providing research overviews covering:

- key themes in committee pre-budget scrutiny;

- overlaps in witness base and themes across committees; and,

- overviews of the extent to which committees' recommendations were reflected in the Budget.

Ailsa Burn-Murdoch
SPICe Research, January 2025

External research collated by committee adviser

Committee structures

55. As in the Scottish Parliament, committee structures are set out in standing orders. Parliaments often have a wide range of committee types, though often with broadly similar structures. For example, the **Australian parliament** has seven categories of committee and the Scottish Parliament has three types (mandatory, subject and bill committees), with a further distinction between committees that are sessional and those that are ad-hoc (time and purpose limited).

56. In the **Senedd**, standing orders specify that the Business Committee is set up at the start of a new session and must table a motion proposing the titles and remits of committees. There is limited public information on how this is decided, for example whether these directly mirror government departments or might vary from this.

57. **Australia's House of Representatives** has a set of general standing committees which are constituted at the start of each parliament. The number, title and coverage of these has varied, with between nine and 13 since 1996. 'Select committees' are usually time- and purpose-limited.

Committee establishment

58. In the **UK Parliament**, committees are established by Standing Orders, usually via a government motion (Hansard Society, 2023). New committees tend to be created when there is a change in government departments, usually following election or change of prime minister. The **House of Commons** has departmental select committees which generally reflect government department title and remit. These usually exist through the whole parliamentary session. In addition, it has a range of cross-cutting and other committees (e.g. Environmental Audit), and **joint committees with the House of Lords**. There are also three Grand Committees (Scottish, Welsh, Northern Ireland).

59. **Both the House of Commons and the House of Lords** also have time-limited committees established under temporary standing orders. One example in the Commons was the Exiting the EU Committee (2016-21). This committee is potentially interesting for this inquiry to explore as it was established with much larger membership than usual, 21 rather than 11, reflecting the need to allow for a wider range of views. In the House of Lords, committees are generally either permanent with a broad focus area (e.g.: Public Services; Built Environment) or temporary special inquiry committees that report on a current issue, usually within a year (e.g.: Artificial Intelligence in Weapons Systems, 2022-3; Preterm Birth, 2024-5).

Varying remits of committees

60. Initial research suggests there are not significant differences between how mandatory and subject committees operate elsewhere, though there are some differences in how chairs/conveners are allocated (particularly in which convenerships are allocated to government members, usually by tradition). As is the case in the Scottish Parliament, different committees will be subject to different amounts of referred work,

which can create an imbalance in legislative burden and restrict the ability to undertake proactive and topical work. In the Scottish Parliament, this has been a concern, leading to the rebalancing of the Justice remit. That issue is not reflected in publicly available UK Parliament documentation.

61. In the **Senedd**, a 2016 Business Committee report indicated that unevenness was an issue of concern and they took steps to alleviate, or at least better distribute, the burden. The same report considered whether to separate out legislative and policy communities, mindful of uneven workload burden across committees. They ultimately decided to retain the combined approach but increased the number of policy and legislation committees from 5 to 6, set up a reserve committee to soak up excess work, and increased provision for unallocated committee time.

Sub-committees

62. One option for relieving the burden on committees is the use of sub-committees. In the **Senedd**, sub-committees may be established and report to their parent committee. They must include at least one member who is from the executive group and one who is not. Finding examples and information on these committees is challenging using publicly available sources, and for the one clear example - rural development (2011) – there is little detail on why it was created or on the reationship to the parent committee.

63. In the **Australian** Parliament sub-committees can be appointed with up to 3 members, with the same powers as full committees but only able to report to their committee (not the senate or parliament directly). From the publicly available information, sub-committees in this system seem to be time and purpose limited.

64. The **Dáil** provides committees with 'the power to appoint sub-Committees and to refer to such sub-Committees any matter comprehended by its orders of reference and to delegate any of its powers to such sub-Committees.'

65. In the **UK Parliament**, select committees can create a sub-committee of no more than 7 members, with permission of the House, which reports to its parent committee. For example, the International Development Committee has a Sub-Committee whose role is to scrutinise the reports of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) and government responses to these. Other examples include a Culture Media and Sport Committee Sub-Committee on Online Harms and Disinformation in 2020, covering this broad topic and forthcoming legislation on online harms. The Foreign Affairs Committee had a Sub-Committee on The Overseas Territories, established to consider the FCDO's management of relations with the Overseas Territories, though this seems not to have been reconstituted following 2024 general election. Defence has previously had a Sub-Committee on AI in Defence.

66. The examples here suggest that sub-committees are useful in at least two scenarios:

- where there is a need for a smaller group of committee members to build up specialist or more technical knowledge on a topic (e.g. technical knowledge on AI, or an appreciation of the challenges of overseas territories which may differ from those of the UK); and,

- where there is a public body whose work overlaps significantly with that of the committee (e.g.: ICAI with its remit to scrutinise UK aid spending, including across departments).

Joint/cross committees, inquiries, and scrutiny activity

67. Parliaments have also made use of joint committees and cross-committee working, both cutting across chambers and within a single chamber, to coordinate inquiries into topical or complex and cross-cutting issues. This can help to avoid the siloing of scrutiny and the duplication of work. For example, if key witnesses appear before one joint committee rather than multiple separate committees this makes questioning from multiple angles possible, as well as reducing member, staff, and witness preparation time and potentially freeing up sitting hours.

68. The term 'joint committees' in the **UK Parliament** refers to those cutting across the two chambers, but there are also many examples of cross-committee working within the **House of Commons**. The IFG has praised this development (2016), identifying examples of effective cross-committee co-operation including joint hearings (both evidence sessions and pre-appointment), jointly commissioned research to support scrutiny, joint sub-committees, and chairs co-authoring letters as a way to 'combine forces' and increase the 'pressure they can bring to bear.' More recent UK examples include a four-committee joint inquiry on air quality (2017-19), a two-committee inquiry into adult social care funding, including a high-profile citizens assembly, and a Covid 'lessons learned' joint inquiry by the Health and Social Care Committee and Science and Technology Committee (2024).

69. In **Australia**, joint committees are established between the Senate and House of Representatives, usually to consider a topical issue and tasked with producing a report within a fixed time frame. Examples here include the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society (2024). As Australia relies mainly on Standing and Joint Committees for scrutiny, select committees are rarely established in the House of Representatives. With only four since 2017 they have not had chance to work together, and there is limited public information on cooperation and working across the single-chamber Standing Committees.

70. In the **Oirechtas**, joint committees are similarly established across chambers, between the Dáil and Seanad. There is little public information available to indicate whether and how single-chamber select committees work collectively, but standing orders do allow for select committees to request joint meetings with other select committees (SO 107).

71. In the **Senedd**, there is also some evidence of cross-committee working. For example in 2018 the Equalities, Local Government and Communities Committee and the External Affairs and Additional Legislation Committee produced a joint

[report on Equalities and Brexit](), with their chairs co-authoring a letter to the First Minister setting out the findings from their individual evidence sessions and joint recommendations. In a rarer example, a Senedd committee has also held [a joint meeting with a UK House of Commons committee]() to take evidence on the draft Wales Bill (2015), with both subsequently producing separate reports and recommendations.

Elected conveners

Chairing allocation process

72. In the **UK Parliament**, at the start of a new Parliament the Speaker decides how many committee chairs should be allocated to each party based on their proportion of seats in the House (SO 122B).[6] There is no published formula for this, and there are concerns, including raised by Professor Alan Renwick and Dr Tom Fleming writing for the [Constitution Unit](), at the lack of transparency and the effects, specifically that small parties lose out and that large governing majorities lead to their committee dominance (both chair and membership) and to less effective scrutiny. Beyond Public Accounts Committee and the Committee on Standards (opposition-chaired), there is no formal process for deciding which party chairs which committees, though the Foreign Affairs and Treasury committees traditionally are chaired by government MPs.

73. In the **Senedd**, for each committee established, the Business Committee tables a motion specifying the political group from which the chair will be elected. They are required under [Standing Orders]() to ensure that the 'balance of chairs across committees reflects the political groups to which Members belong' (SO 17.2B).

74. In the **Australia**n Senate, committee chairs are elected by the committee members, though usually the party decides in advance on which member will be put forward as nominee. Chairs of legislative committees must come from government parties, while chairs of references committees come from non-government parties.

75. In the **Dáil**, chairpersons of committees are appointed. [They advise that this is achieved 'using the d'Hondt system](), a formula that results in the committee chairs proportionately reflecting each party's representation in the Dáil Chamber', They also note that this 'has replaced the previous practice of most committee chairpersons being from parties which are in government', though there is little public information available on the appointment process and time frame for this.

Election processes

House of Commons Chairs have been elected since the beginning of the 2010 Parliament. Reflecting on [the impact of chair elections in a 2024 seminar](), Margaret Hodge MP argued that this change has allowed chairs to benefit from both security

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[6] Backbench Business Committee is a notable exception to this – see [Standing orders Public Business (2023) 122D]() but there are also other committees whose chairs are elected via different procedures. For these the chair is elected at first sitting, usually by vote requiring a simple majority.

of tenure and a degree of independence from their party. A Hansard Society briefing sets out how chairs are elected by vote of all MPs in a secret ballot via the Alternative Vote system. MPs must be nominated for chairship by the lower of either 15 or 10% of their own party MPs, and can also include up to five MPs from other parties in their nomination. The Institute for Government's report Select Committees under Scrutiny published in 2015 argued that the move to elect chairs had at least initially supported a shift away from the previously typical characteristics of chairs: The report highlighted, for example, first term members being elected as chairs, as well as elections seeming to favour members who were seen to be the most centralist of the candidates. In an analysis that broadly concurred with Margaret Hodge's claim of the impact of chair elections, they noted that:

> "Some of the members who became chairs in the last parliament were perceived to have different characteristics to those appointed under the old system. The majority were still the sort of members who would have been appointed under the old system. However, a small but significant minority were not. While we heard plenty of evidence that whips remain involved in elections – making their preferences clear to those members who are willing to listen – the use of a secret ballot significantly weakens their power over the result."

76. The shift to more first-term members being elected as chairs has however not been maintained over time. In 2024, a Hansard Society blog by Marc Geddes and Stephen Bates noted that eight stood but only one was elected (the chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee, for which all candidates were first term MPs). In that period, 25 of 27 elected chairs had frontbench experience in shadow or ministerial roles, and over a quarter had previously served as a chair.

77. Separate to this, MPs are nominated by the Speaker to join the Panel of Chairs (formerly known as Chairs of Standing Committees), and they may then chair (or co-chair) Westminster Hall debates, Public Bill and General committees. There are currently 34 members of the Panel of Chairs.

78. In the Welsh Parliament, at the beginning of the Fifth Senedd (June 2016), the Business Committee proposed allowing all Members to elect the new chairs of the Senedd's Committees. This was in line with recommendations of the Chairs' Forum in the previous session. Members are nominated by a member of their political group, with a second needed if the group has 20+ members. If there is more than one nomination or the nomination is opposed, a secret ballot of the Senedd is held to elect the chair. Members are nominated for committee membership by their political group and must then be elected by the Senedd. Chairs have only been elected since the Fifth Senedd (2016-21), so there is some opportunity to make tentative 'before-and-after' observations here. Diana Stirbu's report on Senedd committee effectiveness (2021) suggests chair elections have provided more stability at leadership level, and her interviewees (including chairs) suggested that election provides them with a more powerful mandate.

Deputy chairs/conveners

79. In the **Australian Parliament**, Senate committee deputy chairs are elected in the same way as chairs. In the House of Representatives, chairs are all from the government party and are appointed by the prime minister, while deputy chairs are appointed by leader of the opposition from non-government parties. Deputy chairs of committees where the chair is from the government party must come from a non- government party. The reverse also applies.

80. In the **Oireachtas**, a committee may choose to elect a vice-chair, either permanently or temporarily in the absence of the usual chair and vice-chair.

81. In the **UK Parliament** and in the **Senedd**, there is no evidence to suggest that there is a formal deputy chair role. However, it may be of interest that in 2024 the **Senedd** Business Committee held a consultation on job-sharing for committee chair role. The consultation elicited responses from representatives from Canada and Ghana, as well as academics such as Professor Sarah Childs, and these responses may help to identify sources of further information for this inquiry.

Payment for chairs/conveners

82. In the **UK Parliament** the role of select committee chair has been a paid position since 2003, based on a recommendation from the Review Body on Senior Salaries. A 2014 House of Commons Library note sets out a useful overview of the path to chair payment and its connection to efforts to 'modernise' the select committee system. It highlights a 2010 report by the Liaison Committee, which suggested chairs should be rewarded and supported for this work. This proposed either payment or increased office costs allowance to cover administrative and research support. A much earlier Hansard Society Commission on Parliamentary Scrutiny (2001) also favoured payment, and at equivalent salary to that of a government minister. The library note also highlights some of the objections raised by MPs along the way, including that paying chairs creates an inequality between them and the committee members, and that singling out committee chairship as uniquely important undermined other alternative (not frontbench-focused) MP career paths (e.g. constituency-focused or issue-campaigning).

83. Since 2012, responsibility for pay level sits with IPSA. It last conducted a pay review in 2016, incorporating a consultation on pay for committee chairs and members of the panel of chairs. The former have always received a flat rate.[7] Up to 2015 the latter were paid based on the length of service, but since 2017 they also receive a flat rate in line with that of select committee chairs.[8]

84. To determine level of pay, the Senior Salary Review Board previously compared

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[7] The IPSA 2016 review found no there was 'no objective hierarchy of importance in the work done by different committees'

[8] The IPSA review of chair pay in 2016 considered whether panel chair pay should stay at one rate, vary for time spent (e.g. fee per session chaired), or vary depending on difficulty of the committee work. The latter was rejected as the factors affecting level of difficulty could not be easily identified and quantified. Payment based on total time spent chairing sessions was also criticised for potentially penalising more efficient chairs.

the chair role to that of a Parliamentary Under Secretary (PUS) and found the chair role required less time, setting a pay rate just over 50% of PUS salary. Cuts to PUS salary saw this proportion rise to around 65% by 2016. In April 2024, select committee chair salary rose to £18,309 (82% of PUS salary). This means select committee chairs and members of the panel of chairs now earn an additional 20% on top of basic member salary.

85. In **Australia**, committee chairs are paid an additional sum, varying by committee, of between 11% and 16% of their base salary, while deputy chairs are also paid for their role and receive an additional 5.5-8%.

86. In **Wales**, chairs are paid a supplement of either £9,751 or £14,636 (13-20% above base MS salary). These are higher and lower rates, but it is not clear from information in the public domain which committees sit in each category and how the determination of 'higher' or 'lower' rate is decided and justified.

87. In the **Oireachtas**, the chair of a Dáil or Senedd committee is paid an additional

€10,888. In 2024, this was equivalent to just under 10% of a TD salary and just under 14% of a senator salary.

Committee establishment with elected chairs

88. In the **House of Commons**, the motion to allocate chairs to parties must be tabled within two weeks of a new parliament forming (Standing Order 122B), which means that other business including swearing-in can delay approval. Once approved, election of chairs must take place within 14 calendar days. A Hansard Society report suggests that timeline from speaker election to committee formation has generally been around 30 sitting days, but timings of election and recess means that in reality this can add up to several (as many as three) calendar months. In contrast, **the House of Lords** in 2019 had committees established within six sitting days. It is not required to allocate chairs by party, nor do parties hold internal elections/processes to arrive at their candidates. The Committee of Selection either nominates members and chairs, or committee members select their chairs at their first sitting.

89. In the **Senedd**, the standing orders say only that 'The Business Committee must, as soon as possible after every Senedd election, table a motion or motions in accordance with Standing Order 16.1 proposing the titles and remits of committees.' There is no public data on how long the process typically takes from election to committee membership being confirmed.

Role of conveners

90. The Institute for Government is among those who have posited a strong connection between the chair and the effectiveness of a committee, stating that "the chair of a select committee determines its impact more than any other factor". In the **UK Parliament**, IPSA (2016: 3) describes the role as a demanding one that goes beyond the formal meetings, '(o)ther work is done by Chairs outside of formal sittings, including acting as ambassadors for their committees, and liaising with ministers, overseas organisations, external audiences

and the media. As such, Chairs of Select Committees can be subject to greater public scrutiny than some other MPs.' In navigating this range of roles, Geddes's research suggests chairs adopt two types of leadership style. These are 'catalysts', who seek to work collaboratively with other committee members and to develop policy influence, and 'chieftains', who seek to develop their own strategic priorities and focus on setting the media agenda and public debate. In a 2024 online seminar on 'How to be an effective select committee chair' organised by the UCL Constitution Unit, former chairs emphasised the importance of knowing your members well, and being able to build consensus across members and across parties. They also highlighted the need to represent a cross-party committee position rather than taking a party position, including often choosing inquiry topics that would allow chairs to take members along with them. The discussion also noted that new chairs are offered coaching by parliamentary authorities on how to be a chair and also how to engage with the media, pointing towards formalised CPD and training in this case.

91. In the **Australian Parliament**, committee chairs are tasked with maintaining order, including on issues of admissibility. Either the chair or deputy must be present for each committee meeting. In most committees, the chair also has a deliberative and a casting vote, if votes are otherwise equally divided. Until its abolition in 2009, there was a separate 'questions to committee chairs' session in the chamber.

92. Similarly, in the **Oireachtas,** chairs have a procedural role in meeting management. There is however a stronger focus on impartiality. Specifically, official guidance notes that 'The chairperson must act in an impartial manner. For that reason, if a chairperson wishes to express a view favouring one side of a discussion, he/she should vacate the chair and become an ordinary member of the committee for the duration of that debate.' Chairs are also responsible for ensuring progress against the committee work programme.

93. In the **Senedd**, committee chairs are similarly responsible for maintaining order and have both a deliberative and a casting vote. In public meetings, they are required to ensure equality of opportunity to speak and a fair balance between asking questions and hearing response from the witnesses. A Business Committee report on committees in 2016 set out 10 key expectations of chairs (Annex C, p.11). This includes mention of chairs having 'knowledge of the subject matter', which may lend itself to professional or other relevant experience as a requirement for chairship of particular committees.

Career progression for conveners

94. Much of the detail available in this area comes from the **UK Parliament**. The decision to pay UK select committee chairs was described by IPSA as directly intended to recognise the work of chairs and to provide an 'alternative career structure in parliament for those who do not take up ministerial or other frontbench roles.' This building of an alternative career structure was also a stated intention behind some of the broader reforms flowing from the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons (2009). However, based on data from the UK House of Commons (2005-2022), Bates (2023) suggests that this has not come to pass, with 'chairships increasingly acting as launchpads for, or interludes between, (shadow) ministerial posts.' This became more pronounced during the period of churn associated with Liz Truss's period as PM, with 11 chairs becoming

ministers or shadow ministers from 2019-22. Bates identifies four pathways: chairing as destination, or as postscript to ministerial or shadow ministerial career, both in decline; or as launchpad for such roles, or interlude between such roles, which have increased.

95. It is perhaps also useful to note here that the UK Parliament has term limits for chairs set out in standing orders – 'Unless the House otherwise orders, no select committee may have as its chair any Member who has served as chair of that committee for the two previous Parliaments or a continuous period of ten years, whichever is the greater period.' (SO 122A). This may be relevant when thinking about scope for conveners to build up a specialism.

Evaluation

Role of committees

96. The **Senedd** sets out committee establishment and processes in Sections 16-17 of Standing Orders. This states that the role of committees is fourfold: 'examine the expenditure, financing, administration, and policy of the government and associated public bodies; examine legislation; undertake other functions specified in Standing Orders; and consider any matter affecting Wales.' The 2016 Business Committee report also sets out their vision of 'world class committees', highlighting what the committee system should aspire to be and to achieve.

97. In the UK Parliament, committee establishment, chair election processes and other details are set out in detail in Standing Orders 121-152L. For select committees related to government departments, these note that 'Select committees shall be appointed to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the principal government departments as set out in paragraph (2) of this order and associated public bodies.' For each of the other committees, a brief note is given on their role, size and operation.

98. Committee roles, functions and procedures in the Dáil are outlined in Standing Orders 93-153.

How committees are evaluated elsewhere

99. This is an area where there is considerable and recent research that the Committee can draw on. The UK House of Commons Liaison Committee held an inquiry in 2019 on the 'Effectiveness and Influence of the Select Committee System.' This was slightly curtailed by the calling of a general election, but the Committee did publish a substantial report and the written evidence submissions and oral transcripts would provide useful information for this inquiry.

100. For the **Senedd**, Diana Stirbu's 2021 report ('Power, Influence and Impact of Senedd Committees') qualitatively explores what committee effectiveness means and how it might be supported and measured. Based on scholarship review, interviews and workshops with chairs, officials, and external experts, she identifies key features of effective committees (p.48-51). She also identifies conditions necessary for effective evaluation (p.52-56) and proposes an extensive range of potential indicators for evaluation towards the end. This research was conducted through an academic fellowship, which could be considered a form of hybrid (neither purely internal or external) evaluation. Another Stirbu piece (2022) discusses public engagement and how

this can strengthen committee work, and this may be a further avenue for considering how committee effectiveness is defined and measured.

101.   Other notable pieces of work that have sought to draw together evidence on UK parliamentary committee effectiveness, which begin to suggest how it might be evaluated, include two from the Institute for Government (2015) and Constitution Unit (2011). There is also significant evidence available on evaluating specific aspects of committees' work, including by Danielle Beswick and Stephen Elstub on witness and evidence diversity, on engaging with the public in general (including extensive and international comparative work by Professor Cristina Leston- Bandeira and the International Parliament Engagement Network), and on evaluating engagement with academic researchers (including reports by Danielle Beswick and Marc Geddes; and a recent article by Prabhakar on academic fellowships).

102.   Outside of legislative bodies, it is worth noting that other scrutiny bodies are in a similar position of trying to understand the impact of their work. Audit Scotland published details of its impact monitoring, evaluation and reporting approach in July 2024, which included setting out a framework for monitoring, evaluating and reporting impact.

Dr Danielle Beswick, University of Birmingham
Committee Adviser, January 2025

Expanded SPICe research on Scottish Parliament Committees over the Parliamentary Sessions (April)

This research has been carried out by SPICe using a combination of internally collated Scottish Parliament data (taken from the SPICe statistical volumes and Official Report), and secondary research on ministerial remits and profile/career path of conveners.

Whilst it attempts to set out some of the patterns and trends in committee business and contextual factors that influence it, it must be emphasised that Committees set their own work programmes, including how to approach scrutiny of referred work. This means that the reasons for committees' sitting hours or work covered are undoubtedly far more complex than can be captured within statistics.

Context – Party and Scottish Government size and impact

The size and number of committees and size of parties within the Parliament will impact on the number of members available to sit on committee roles. Typically, in most parties the leader and deputy leader of each party will not sit on committees, though in smaller parties this isn't always the case (notably, the leader and deputy leader of the Scottish Green Party have tended to take committee roles, excepting their time in ministerial posts). The Presiding Officer and their two deputies will of course also be removed from the available pool of committee members. In general, this means an even spread across the largest parties in the number of members unable to sit on committees, which means that the 'committee member pool' is likely to stay proportionate to the d'Hondt method of seat allocation.

The exception to this is the parties in Government or coalition, where any member with a ministerial role becomes unavailable to sit on committees. This means that the size of the Government, a decision made at a governmental level, will impact the number of members of these parties in the committee pool. This, combined with changes at a ministerial level, can impact on committee member and convener churn.

Both majority and government sizes have varied over time. The number of members represented by governing parties, after presiding officer elections) has ranged from 47 in the SNP's minority government of Session 3, to 72 during the Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition of Session 1, with the largest single party government arising from the SNP's 68-member majority of Session 4.

At the start of session, governments have ranged in size from a low of 16 ministers in Session 3, to 29 members at the start of Session 6. Through the first three sessions the cabinet size remained fixed through the session (at 21, 19 and 16 members for Sessions 1-3 respectively). Changes in Session 4 were minimal at first, but from the beginning of the fifth cabinet of Session 4 in 2014 until the formation of

the current fourth cabinet of Session 6 in 2024, cabinet sizes grew progressively. Session 5 began with 23 ministers, peaked at 28 ministers and ended with 27.

Proportionate to party size, this means that the proportion of members of the largest party in ministerial posts, and therefore unavailable for committee roles, has grown over time. At its lowest, this was 26% in Session 2 (for Labour, with coalition partners Liberal Democrats having 35% of its members in government, and the proportion for the parties combined being 28%). At its peak, during the fifth cabinet of Session 5, 46% of SNP MSPs were in ministerial posts. At present, despite the recent reduction in cabinet size, this still stands at 40%.

An initial comparison of cabinet size against committee seats illustrates the challenges this might bring. At the start of Session 1, when committee seats were at a peak, the cabinet represented 56% of members of the governing parties, which, removing the Presiding Officer, left 107 backbenchers. With committee seats based roughly on proportionate party size, these 107 members would have had to fill around 77 committee seats, so 1.4 seats each. At the start of Session 6, with a larger cabinet, despite there being fewer committee seats, each backbencher of the governing party would have needed to fill approximately 1.7 committee seats.

In addition to the Government increasing in size, there have been more cabinet reshuffles in recent years. This has meant that the committee pool has not been static – members going in and out of ministerial posts appears to have contributed to churn in committee membership, as well as less consistency in the ministers appearing before committees.

Table 1: Parliamentary Sessions 1-6: Governments, First Ministers and Presiding Officers

	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4	Session 5	Session 6
Years	1999-2003	2003-2007	2007-2011	2011-2016	2016-2021	2021-2026
Type of Government	Coalition	Coalition	Minority	Majority	Minority	Minority/Co-operation (until April 2024)
Largest Party of Government (Size[9])	Labour (56)	Labour (50)	SNP (47)	SNP (69)	SNP (63)	SNP (63)

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[9] Party size is as at the start of the Session

Coalition/Co-operation partner (Size[10])	Liberal Democrats (16)	Liberal Democrats (17)	N/A	N/A	N/A	Green (7)
First Minister	Donald Dewar (until Oct 2000), Henry McLeish (until Nov 2001), Jack McConnell	Jack McConnell	Alex Salmond	Alex Salmond (until Nov 2014), Nicola Sturgeon	Nicola Sturgeon	Nicola Sturgeon (until Mar 2023), Humza Yousaf (until May 2024), John Swinney
Presiding Officer	David Steel	George Reid	Alex Fergusson	Tricia Marwick	Ken Macintosh	Alison Johnstone

Movement of subjects between committees

Looking at the movement of committee remits across sessions, there are some key points that stand out.

Some subjects have been added over time, which is understandable – a greater focus on climate change, islands policy and social security reflect both further devolution of powers, and the addition of dedicated policy in areas where it did not previously exist.

Rather than movement between primary subject areas, there has been varying combinations for the interconnected subject areas of environment, rural, climate change, and net zero. These have run parallel to the framing of issues by the Government. Sometimes the primary focus has been transport, sometimes economy, and sometimes land reform. The current links to are focused on energy. This is a clear example of government priorities shaping scrutiny – might it be the case that aspects of scrutiny are lost when subjects are framed in this way?

Related to this, there are subject areas which have previously had a clear and explicit focus in remits and have now disappeared. The voluntary sector and charities have not been referenced explicitly in a remit since Session 2, despite being involved significantly in public sector service delivery. This may be because the sector is considered a mainstreamed issue, relevant to most, if not all subject committees. However, unless this explicitly stated committees run the risk of not

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[10] Party size is at the start of the Session, but not including any MSP who was elected as a Member of that party but subsequently elected as Presiding Officer.

seeing common issues across the sector (though this is a repeated theme in budget scrutiny).

The subject areas which have moved around the most are culture, housing, tourism, transport and skills. In this section, culture has been explored as a case study by looking at committee legacy and annual reports. This is an approach which could be used to inform the placing and grouping of subjects should the Parliament choose not to follow ministerial remits in Session 7.

Areas of research and key questions might include:

Housing – this has moved a lot, but there has for the most part remained a connection to remits connected to Local Government function. The one exception was when it was paired with Infrastructure and Capital Investment, so understanding how this changed the level and profile of scrutiny would be interesting.

Tourism – how has the framing of tourism as being an enterprise and economy issue, to a culture and external affairs issue, changed how it has been scrutinised?

Transport – this has been grouped in, over the years, with environment, climate change, local government, infrastructure, capital investment, rural economy, connectivity, net zero, and energy. Again, the overarching question might be whether transport is primarily a matter for capital infrastructure and connectivity (at a national level), economic development and local infrastructure (at a regional level), or sustainability? And, if it is positioned with just one subject, how do issues relating to other areas get captured in scrutiny? Considerations like this are particularly pertinent where there is a risk that committees will be careful not to step on one another's toes.

Skills is another subject that has jumped between subjects – enterprise/economy, and education. Interestingly, although the remit sat with education in Session 4, it was the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee that did the bulk of the work on skills and employability that session. Education took on more skills work in Session 5, before the focus of that committee became explicitly on young people in Session 6. Although 'skills' is not listed explicitly in the remit of the Economy Committee, it is once again that committee which has looked at skills this session. This is an example of the ministerial responsibility having passed back and forth – when Education covered skills in Session 4, it sat with within the ministerial remit for economy, and it currently sits within the ministerial remit for education. Of the past three sessions, only in Session 5 did the ministerial remits and committee lead on skills align, which demonstrated that although committee may follow ministerial remits in structure, there are deviations in actual work covered.

Culture as a case study.

The culture remit was paired with education in Sessions 1, 3 and 4. In Session 2, it was paired with enterprise, and since Session 5, it has been paired with European/external affairs, constitution and tourism (tourism having moved from the Economy brief).

Looking at committee sitting times, it's challenging to track the impact of remit changes because more than one change occurs at once in most cases, and broader trends in sitting times have an impact. For instance, when 'economy' lost the culture remit in Session 3, it gained energy and tourism.

In Session 2, when the subject was paired with enterprise, the Committee gave some useful reflections in its Legacy Report on both the remit of the Committee, and workload balance:

> "As is quickly apparent from the section above, the impact of the very broad remit of the Committee has meant that the workload has varied from enterprise issues, to tourism, arts and culture, sports, lifelong-learning etc.

> "It is also clear, however, that certain subjects, such as science policy, corporate social responsibility, European structural funding, built heritage and architecture, which all fall within the remit, have barely been addressed, despite their importance.

> It is the considered opinion of the members of this Committee that such a wide-ranging remit is not always conducive to proper scrutiny of the subject matter and to balancing the legislative workload with own-initiative work such as inquiries."

And

> "The early years in the Enterprise and Culture Committee and its predecessors in session one were seen as having a fairly light legislative workload. However, this did not materialise in the second-half of this session. One bill in particular, reforming bankruptcy and diligence law, took over a calendar year to complete. This, on top of member's bills, one of which in particular (the St Andrew's Day Bank Holiday (Scotland) Bill) proved very controversial and time-consuming, shows that it is not always possible for a committee to rely on having a lot of time for own-initiative inquiries. It also shows that there is no such thing as a standard timeframe within which consideration of legislation can be completed."

Overall, despite moves between committees, legacy report suggestions for work have been carried through.

Culture scrutiny across Sessions 1-6

An indication of the level of work each session is set out, taken from legacy reports where possible, and annual reports otherwise.

Session 1 (Education, Culture and Sport Committee)

The Committee carried out inquiries into Scottish ballet, Gaelic broadcasting, and the national arts companies. It also reported on a petition into roman remains at Cramond and carried out an investigation into Scotland's film industry. Interestingly, the Committee made use of reporters for discreet inquiry work, including tasking two

committee members with conducting an inquiry into the structure and funding of Scotland's museums.

Session 2 (Enterprise and Culture Committee)

The Committee lead on scrutiny of The St Andrews Day (Scotland) Bill and National Register of Tartans (Scotland) Bill. It also carried out an inquiry into Arts in the Community, held a separate roundtable on community arts, and held a hearing on BBC Scotland internal reviews.

Session 3 (Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee)

In Session 3 the Committee made a conscious decision across its remit to focus on regular check-ins and one-off evidence sessions than on inquiries. As a result, it took regular oral evidence across the session on the theme of 'Broadcasting in Scotland', and held one-off evidence sessions on artis and culture issues, Creative Scotland, and on the creative industries. It did carry out two inquiries on culture – one short inquiry into Scottish local newspapers, and Stage 1 scrutiny of the Creative Scotland (Scotland) Bill (which fell at the Stage 1 vote). It had one LCM referred during the course of the session.

Session 4 (Education and Culture Committee)

During Session 4 the Committee carried out inquiries into Broadcasting and the BBC, and into press regulation. It carried out scrutiny of the Scottish Government's BSL plan, with an extensive engagement programme. It also held several one-off evidence sessions in the culture remit that are not referenced in its legacy report. Interestingly, the Committee also chose not to mention its inquiries into Scotland's educational and cultural future, or the National Library of Scotland (Scotland) Bill, which illustrates how looking at legacy reports of committees may not always show a full picture of their work. N.B. , the Session 4 legacy report did, however, have a useful graphic which explained it's changes in membership over the session.

It's worth noting that in S4 the Economy, Energy and Tourism committee carried out an inquiry into the economic Impact of the film, tv and video games industries, which illustrates how there may be possibilities for subject areas to be pursued by different committees depending on the angle.

Session 5 (Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee)

During Session 5, the Committee carried out inquiries into arts funding, support for the screen sector and Glasgow School of Art, as well as leading scrutiny on the Census 2022 (Scotland) Bill. Towards the ends of the session, the Committee looked at the impact of COVID-19 on culture and tourism, including the impact on print journalism. The Committee said, in its report:

> "Session Five has been an extraordinarily challenging session of Parliament. The issues of Brexit and the impact of a pandemic on the culture and tourism sectors have been of direct relevance to the Committee's remit. This resulted in a significant scrutiny workload and stretched the capacity of Members and officials given the extremely broad and diverse nature of the Committee's

remit. The constraint of being a committee that met on a Thursday also places a practical time constraint upon the range of evidence that can be taken prior to Chamber business commencing."

Session 6

Through Session 6 to date, funding for culture has formed the Committees focus for annual budget scrutiny, creating a longer-term overview and extensive body of evidence. The Committee has carried out inquired into the census, the impact of the digital first agenda on broadcasting, and into culture in communities. It has also taken evidence on the role of Channel 4, and on Glasgow School of Art. In terms of referred work, the Committee considered an LCM on Cultural Objects (Protection from seizure) Bill.

Conclusions – remits

Committee remits and structures are largely driven by government priorities and ministerial remits. This has meant, at times, committees remarking on the challenge of managing a broad range of subject areas. There seems to have been times where a subject has been a better fit with one committee over an another, evidenced by committees carrying out work which may technically sit with another. There is also evidence of some inconsistency between aligning committee remits and ministers, which again may link to where a subject best 'fits'. Case study work shows that, reassuringly, where remits have passed back and forth, legacy advice has generally been carried across to the new committee.

Culture is a good example of a subject area that has limited referred work. This means that the burden of referred work from other subject areas covered by a committee might impact on the ability to look at culture. This is noticeable in Session 2, where the subject was paired with enterprise – without there having been referred legislation in the area, there may have been little work on the culture remit. Shorter inquiries, one-off evidence sessions and using budget scrutiny as an opportunity to focus on culture have helped to broaden scrutiny in the area and avoid it being outcompeted. The prominence of the subject has grown, and this seems to have been reflected in a more consistent and sustained focus across the past two sessions despite the 'competition' at times from high-stakes issues like COVID-19 and its impact on tourism, and Brexit.

There are some areas, such as housing, transport, tourism and skills, where further research might be useful to support understanding the challenges and impacts arising from the placement of these subjects.

Committee sitting hours

Impact of remits on committee sitting hours

Sitting times are one measure of 'business' that can be explored, however this should be looked at with wider context in mind – some committees meet fortnightly instead of weekly (or have in the past), and some are constrained by Thursday meeting slots. Data for Session 1 is incomplete so can't be used in comparisons and

comparing Sessions 2 and 3 to Sessions 4 and 5 is challenging given the move to different sitting hours and 5 years terms in Session 4. Through all sessions, the final year is typically the busiest as it is when legislation scrutiny activity peaks, but the way that this affects committees will vary significantly based on both the committee remit and the legislation programme.

SPICe has explored the sitting times of committees at points where they had relatively unchanged remits between sessions.[11]

With all the caveats above considered, one of the only reliable comparisons is to look at the committees which retained effectively the same remit between Sessions 2 and 3, or Sessions 4 and 5.

Between Sessions 2 and 3, the rural and European committees saw the least change in sitting times (+13% and -10% respectively). The Justice committee had a fall in sitting time, of 22%. The sitting hours of the Equal Opportunities Committee rose by 63%.

Between Sessions 4 and 5, the sitting hours of the Equalities and Local Government committees remained the least changed with only a 6% increase in both. The sitting hours of all the other committees with unchanged remits fell, most notably Justice by 25%, Health by 30% and Finance by 41%.

This makes it clear that remit alone doesn't impact business – in this case, the change in Government in Session 3 and from majority to minority government in Session 5 will undoubtedly have had a significant impact on portfolio priorities, as the next section shows.

Impact of legislation on sitting hours

Exploring primary legislation in order to understand it's impact on committees is challenging to some extent as it is not possible to collate statistics on how long committees spent examining bills during meetings. The amount and length of bills, length of time passing, and degree of changes has been reviewed at a top level. Overall, the number of bills, and the time taken for these to pass, increased over time between Sessions 1 and 5, with Session 4 standing out as the 'busiest' session. More bills have been passed so far in Session 6 than all sessions at the equivalent point excepting Session 4. Looking at the length of bills at introduction and passing, there has been a trend towards more dramatic differences in length, implying more changes are being made to draft legislation.

Looking at the referral of bills to committees, unsurprisingly the justice committees have faced the highest legislative burden over time. Committees covering local government, rural affairs and health have also has the highest numbers of bills

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[11] The committees used here are those which have been in place with a fair degree of consistency through all sessions, albeit with shifting names and some remit changes. These can be broadly referred to as the subject committees Criminal Justice, Health, Local Government, Economy, Education and Rural, and the mandatory committees Equalities, Europe, Finance, Petitions, and Standards. Subordinate Legislation and Public Audit have not been included, but both also saw Session 4 spikes.

referred, with the former two typically having more referrals in the latter half of the session. Economy and finance, and less often education also find their legislative burden ramping up further into the session. Mapping legislative burden against sitting times would be the next progression of this analysis.

As noted, the final year of the session is when legislative activity is at its peak. Interestingly, the addition of a fifth year to the Parliamentary session did not appear to ease this pressure. Education saw sitting times increase by 189% between years 4 and 5 of Session 4. In the same year, Criminal Justice saw a 149% increase in hours, and Standards a 140% increase. Overall, for the 11 Committees whose remits remained similar between Session 3 and Session 4, the 'final year' workload increases averaged 102%, compared to 59% the previous session.

Again, having a majority government undoubtedly had a significant impact on these figures. Looking at Session 5, the Year 5 increases were less severe, averaging just 28% but with some variance. Education saw the highest increase at 74%, followed by Europe at 59% and Finance at 35%. All other committees saw their Year 5 sitting times increase by between 20 and 28%, except the rural committee which saw little change.

Throughout Sessions 3-5, not considering the impact of the Brexit process, the committee most consistently affected by high sitting time increases was education, followed by equalities. All other committees varied; no doubt based on legislative programmes.

Looking at percentage of total committee sitting time attributed to each committee, the greatest proportion of sitting hours across the totality of Sessions 3 and 4 were allocated to the Health Committee, followed by Justice. Rural, Economy, and Education were all not far behind. The patterns of proportionate sitting hours tend to vary by year, with some committees often 'using' a higher proportion of hours at the start of the session, and others towards the end. Local government, Education and Finance for instance, tend towards being among the busier committees at the start of the session, but not at the end. Economy has shifted from being busier mid-session, to busy throughout, and both Health and Justice fluctuate more. Thinking about the final year spike, Rural sat for the greatest proportion of hours in the final year of Session 3. In Session 4, this was Health, and in Session 5 this was Economy.

The trends for Session 6 so far are similar – Health, Criminal Justice and Rural have has the greatest proportion of sitting time across the session, though the pressure on Local Government and Equalities appears to have built through the session.

Conclusions – sitting hours

This is only a light-touch exploration of committee sitting patterns, but it indicates that there are some factors which could help to inform committee structures, size and sitting days, especially for the six subject committees which dominate sitting hours:

The makeup of the Government and whether it is a majority or minority government clearly impacts on committee sitting hours. A majority government is likely to result in increased committee loads across the board.

The priorities of the Government will impact which committees are busiest, but Health, Criminal Justice and Rural have consistently had high numbers of sitting hours proportionate to other committees.

The pressure in Year 5 of a session will undoubtedly vary based on the legislative programme, and most committees will be impacted but Education appears to be the subject committee most susceptible to big changes. The mandatory committees that may have more consistent workloads through the session and make up a smaller proportion of overall sitting hours, are also heavily affected in the final year of the session (particularly Equalities, Petitions and Finance)

Career path and experience of conveners

Overview

The following table sets out an overview of the role which conveners in Sessions 4 to 6 held prior to their convener role, the roles which they went on to do, and the number of instances where there is evidence of a subject specialism (either linked to prior career, or to political roles).

Table 2: Convener backgrounds, career path and specialism, Sessions 4 to 6

	Session 4	Session 5	Session 6*
Total Conveners over session	29	29	29
Pre-convenership			
First session	6	9	13
Had convened before	5	4	2
Had been a minister before	7	3	3
Had significant party or parliament role before	10	14	7
Former MP	1	1	3
Post-convenership			
Went on to convene again	5	3	N/A
Left for Ministerial role	3	4	8
Left for shadow cabinet or spokesperson role	3	5	3
Went on to SPCB/Bureau/DPO/Commission	3	2	0
Went on to other political work outside SP	10	3	0
Convener role was last significant political role	12	14	1
Specialism			
Evidence of subject specialism linked to cttee	6	7	10

* To 15 January 2025

Pre-convenership

The number of 'first session' members in convener roles has increased each session since Session 4. There has been over twice as many conveners in their first session in the Scottish Parliament in Session 6 than there were in Session 4, with first session members currently amounting to almost half of conveners.

Whether it because of there being more first session conveners, or because of wider changes to the experience among MSPs, the type of professional political experience being brought to the convener role has changed. Compared to Session 4 and Session 5, there are far fewer Session 6 conveners who have been conveners or have held a Scottish Parliament party or parliamentary role before. In Session 4, there were seven conveners who had previously been ministers. In both Session 5 and Session 6, this number reduced to three.

However, there are more conveners in Session 6 who have previous elected roles – seven of the 13 first session conveners were councillors, and three were Members of Parliament. By comparison, in Session 5 there were two council members and one former MP within the nine first session conveners. In Session 4, none of the first session conveners had been councillors, and overall fewer conveners had experience of elected roles outside of the Scottish Parliament. Some of these changes will reflect member turnover and the length of time that has passed since the last substantive change in party balance, but it may also reflect changes to the structure of political career pathways.

Post-convenership

It's challenging to sum up what former conveners have gone on to do given that Session 6 is incomplete, but of the 29 conveners in Session 6, eight have left their convener role to take up a ministerial role, compared to three in Session 4 and four in Session 5. The number of former conveners moving into shadow cabinet roles (three), is the same as in Session 4, and slightly lower than Session 5.

In Session 4 there was a roughly even split between former conveners who went on to other political roles outside the SP (10) or took up SP bodies posts (3), and those for whom their convener role was their last significant political role (12). The number stepping down from politics, retiring, or taking on SP body roles was similar in Session 5, but the number going on to further political work fell to just three.

As of 20 March 2025, one former Session 6 convener has left Parliament, and seven members who have been Session 6 conveners have announced that they will be standing down at the next election, including three first session members (two of whom left convener roles to become ministers).

Subject specialism

The level of subject specialism in conveners seems to have grown each session, but this may be because of the reduction in members who have served multiple sessions and therefore moved around different subject areas as conveners, spokespersons

and ministers. Only two conveners who became ministers and one who became a shadow spokesperson did so in subject areas linked to their committee experience.

Not many conveners came from a different career into Parliament without having first passed through local government or party roles, and there are very few examples of professional and lived experience reflecting on a convener's committee assignment. The exceptions to this tend towards those who have backgrounds in the legal professions, media and agriculture. There were more instances of first session members bringing their professional experience to their convener role in Session 5 than in Session 6. There are also subtle trends based on party, with the SNP tending to favour those from local government, UK Parliament, journalism or party/campaign roles for convener roles.

Conclusion - conveners

Overall, it seems that the experience and subject specialism of conveners is highly dependent on the makeup and circumstances in Parliament as a whole. Historically, a convener role may have been more likely to be a closing step in a career, either as an MSP or in politics as a whole. A byproduct of this may be, however, that a convener has held roles focused on a wider variety of subjects over time (with some exceptions). As long-serving members stand down, there may be fewer members in this position.

Conversely, if there is a higher turnover in membership, there may be more new members who have come to the Parliament following other elected roles who are using the convener role as an opportunity to progress their career, particularly in government.

If this trend continues, there may end up being a split in convenership experience, both between longer serving and newer members, and between those from government and opposition parties. In both cases, there are few examples of subject specialism, and although this has increased a little, this is more likely to be a coincidence based on less time served as an MSP. Given the increase of first session conveners, and subtle differences in career backgrounds of conveners based on party, comparing the career paths of these members to the wider membership of their parties would be interesting.

Ailsa Burn-Murdoch
SPICe Research, April 2025

Roles and expectations of committees as defined in other legislatures (April 2025)

The 2019 House of Commons Liaison Committee inquiry into The Effectiveness and Influence of the Select Committee System revised the 'Core Tasks' of committees, with much greater emphasis on how committees perform their roles. In doing so they [reflected](#) on previous revisions by predecessor committees in 2002 and 2012, acknowledging that updates are periodically necessary as the context shifts and to reflect changes in committee structures and resources. Their revised statement of aims, core tasks and how these will be pursued are as follows:

Overall aim: To hold Ministers and Departments to account, and to investigate matters of public concern where there is a need for accountability to the public through Parliament.

To deliver this aim our core tasks are:

- **Policy:** To examine the policy of the department, including areas of emerging policy or where existing policy is deficient, and make recommendations.

  This may include legislative scrutiny, post-legislative scrutiny, and scrutiny of delegated legislation where relevant.

- **Implementation:** To hold departments and arm's-length bodies to account for implementation of committee recommendations. Too often inquiries come up with important recommendations, widely welcomed but left to gather dust on the shelf.

- **Administration:** To examine the administration of departments and their associated public bodies, including scrutiny of their strategy and their performance and management information.

This includes holding pre-appointment hearings where appropriate.

- **Expenditure:** To inform and support the House's control of public expenditure by examining the expenditure plans, outturn and performance of the department and its public bodies, and the relationships between spending and delivery of outcomes, including effectiveness and value for money.

- **Matters of public concern:** To consider matters of public concern where there is a need for accountability to the public through Parliament, including the actions of organisations or individuals with significant power over the lives of citizens or with wide-reaching public responsibilities.

To deliver these tasks we will:

- Hear from those with relevant responsibilities, expertise, knowledge and lived experience, using methods which maximise our ability to engage with a diverse range of people.

- Work in collaboration when appropriate with research communities in the public and charitable sectors to make sure we are well informed, including using reliable and accurate data, and to ensure we use the best research evidence to support our findings.

The Senedd Business Committee similarly set out the aim and expectations of its committees, which are more similar in scope to those of the Scottish Parliament, in 2016. These are as follows:

Committees of the Assembly should demonstrably improve the quality of policy outcomes, legislation, public services and government spending for society as a whole in Wales. They should be respected, influential and accessible, acting with integrity and independence. Their work should be strategic and rigorous.

This means that Assembly committees will:

i. have a clear, agreed, strategic plan for their work that prioritises their activities and focuses their use of time and resource;

ii. be a top priority for the Members who serve on them;

iii. be guided by Chairs who fulfil all of the expectations set for them by the Assembly;

iv. be respected and listened to by the Welsh Government because of the quality of their inquiries and scrutiny, the rigour of their questioning, the depth of their analysis and the value of their legislative amendment. The Government will be mindful of the reaction of committees as it formulates its policy, spending and legislative plans;

v. scrutinise policy, spending and legislation within their portfolio in the round, not as isolated aspects of their responsibilities;

vi. offer and expect constructive engagement with the Welsh Government but retain their detachment and ability to offer objective criticism;

vii. not be limited by constraints on access to Ministers, information or witnesses and will be able to draw on the expert advice and support they require;

viii. engage with a wide diversity of people, be seen by stakeholder groups as important, influential players and as the natural place to go to with concerns and ideas, and undertake work that enhances the public reputation of the Assembly. Their outputs will be accessible to as wide an audience as possible;

ix. ensure that those who contribute to their work see the value of their participation;

x. and seek critical analysis and evaluation to improve their performance.

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Committee Adviser, April 2025