



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body
5 June 2025 (Session 6)

Review of Scotland's Futures Forum – Phase 1

Executive summary

1. This paper summarises the key messages from research undertaken for phase 1 of the review of Scotland's Futures Forum. It invites the SPCB to make any comments on those findings and agree to proceed to phase 2 of the review (options appraisal).
2. The full research report along with an executive summary of the report are included alongside the papers pack.

Issues and options

Background

3. At its meeting on 12 December 2024, the SPCB agreed to undertake a review of the Futures Forum as well as the approach for that review.
4. The SPCB agreed that phase 1 of the review would gather information to understand the current and future need for futures thinking and foresight in the Parliament, and how this contributes to the overall mission of the Parliament to inform, support scrutiny and influence policy and decision-making.
5. Qualitative research was carried out by two researchers from SPICe between February and April 2025. 28 participants across MSPs, MSP staff, SPS staff and the current and previous Heads of Business for the Forum shared their views.

Key messages from phase 1 research

6. All participants expressed the view that futures thinking in a parliamentary context is vital, especially now, when parliamentary democracy is under threat, and future uncertainty posed by climate change, conflict and the pandemic is very present. Participants spoke of the fact that futures thinking provided a space that was not political and that it offered an opportunity to “lift the heads” of MSPs from day-to-day work. Participants also thought there was something unique in the Parliament having a futures body that could not be fulfilled by other think tanks or futures institutes.
7. While participants emphasised the importance of futures thinking, they did not suggest that this needed to be in the form of the Forum or have its current functions. Some participants raised practical issues about the current structure

Reference: SPCB (2025) - Paper 29

and governance of the Forum, including the bureaucracy involved with the limited company.

8. The form and structure futures thinking takes was seen as less important than its purpose and functions. While there was some divergence about the purpose and functions of futures thinking in the Parliament, aspirations were ambitious with some key themes emerging:
 - It should inform national strategic planning and provoke constructive debates about Scotland's future.
 - It should be able to collaborate with external experts, academics, and the public.
 - It should be impartial and autonomous, with the ability to challenge government and raise important questions proactively.
 - It should be able to provide effective engagement and communication with MSPs and their staff, as well as engage wider parliamentary staff in futures thinking.
9. Participants offered a variety of opinions on the form, structure and placement of futures thinking in the Parliament. For example, some participants emphasised that the form must allow futures thinking to be outward-facing and forward-looking, unencumbered by bureaucratic, internal concerns. Some saw benefits in working more closely with committees, while others thought this could lead to more reactive work rather than fostering the broader, long-term perspective needed in futures thinking. Overall, the research suggests that futures thinking needs to be structured in a way that adds capacity, is connected with other work in the Parliament, and is able to produce impactful outputs that demonstrate value to MSPs in particular.
10. Views were expressed that futures thinking needs to be properly resourced to fulfil its functions. Some participants recognised that to achieve their aspirations for a futures thinking service, further resource would be required. However, opportunities to maximise impact within current resource levels were also highlighted.

Phase 2

11. The phase 1 research demonstrates a consensus on the importance of futures thinking in the Parliament. However, there is no clear view on what form or structure that futures thinking should take, with the research suggesting a range of considerations that need to be taken into account when deciding on the most appropriate model for the Parliament.
12. Should the SPCB agree to proceed to phase 2, then an options appraisal will be prepared building on the phase 1 research. This will also be informed by comparative research undertaken on different futures thinking models, as well as more detailed discussions with relevant officials to compare and evaluate different options.

Governance

13. As previously agreed by the SPCB, the review is being led by Susan Mansfield, Head of Business at Scotland's Futures Forum, with a Senior Responsible Owner (Gael Scott) appointed from parliamentary staff.

Resource implications

14. The review is being undertaken through the flexible use of the Forum's existing resources and will collaborate and consult with relevant offices in the Parliament.

Publication Scheme

15. This paper can be published.

Next steps

16. Assuming the SPCB agrees to move to phase 2, then officials will prepare the options appraisal which will be presented to the SPCB in October.

Decision

17. The SPCB is invited to:

- provide any comments on the phase 1 research findings
- agree to proceed to phase 2 of the review (options appraisal).

Scotland's Futures Forum
May 2025