

# **Chief Executive's Report to the SPCB**

## **December 2021**

### **Introduction**

This Report looks at activities across the organisation from early November to mid-December.

Items highlighted include:

- Positive feedback from BSL users in response to the BBC now using a duplicate feed of the live BSL interpretation used on SPTV for Covid Statements and FMQs.
- The upcoming scrutiny of a large number of common frameworks.
- A substantial increase in the number of Freedom of Information requests during this calendar year.
- An overview of Wellbeing Week.

**David McGill**

Clerk/Chief Executive

# Overview of Parliamentary Activities

## Legislation and Parliamentary Business

### Non-Government Bills Unit

The team is working on numerous proposals at present, including a number which have multiple policy strands within one bill proposal. The first consultation of session 6, on the proposal on assisted dying, will conclude on 22 December. A number of consultations on new proposals will launch early in the New Year.

The NGBU drafting panel produced 12 Members bills last session. Early demand for NGBU resources in year one of this session suggest the figure will be higher in session 6.

### Broadcasting Office

The Broadcasting Office has produced a duplicate feed of the live BSL interpretation used on SPTV to share with broadcasters. The BBC are now using this feed for their live coverage of Covid Statements and FMQs. Feedback from the BSL users has been very positive. This service has been provided at no additional cost and is a positive example of collaboration with external partners to engage with potentially excluded audiences.

### Committees

Committees are continuing to scrutinise a variety of Bills and are undertaking a number of inquiries. Looking ahead, a major challenge over the next few months will be scrutiny of a large number (around 20) of common frameworks, which is part of the post-EU membership/UK internal market framework. This will create pinch points for both Scottish Parliament staff resources (legal, clerking, and SPICe) as well as for subject committees and, inevitably, there will need to be prioritisation as to which frameworks are subjected to substantive scrutiny. Some specific areas of committee work in the last period are highlighted below:

The **Health, Social Care and Sport Committee** successfully produced its Stage 1 report on the Transvaginal Mesh Removal (Cost reimbursement) (Scotland) Bill, working to an expedited timescale. The Committee's scrutiny included a sensitively handled informal session with a number of women directly affected by complications from transvaginal mesh implants to hear first-hand about their experiences. The Committee will consider the Bill at Stage 2 on 14 December and has secured a commitment from the Scottish Government to provide the Committee with a draft version of the cost

reimbursement scheme established by the Bill in advance of that date. This draft scheme will be the subject of further scrutiny by the Committee early in the New Year with a view to reviewing to what extent the scheme reflects the Committee's key recommendations, including those on eligibility, categories of costs to be reimbursed and the cut-off date for qualification for reimbursement through the scheme

Throughout November, and into December, the **Social Justice and Social Security Committee** is exploring its remit through a combination of formal evidence and informal engagement work to assist it in identifying its priorities. To date the Committee has held an evidence session on homelessness and rough sleeping, which covered a number of issues around the pandemic, health and child poverty. The Committee invited members of the **Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee** to attend the session to bring their knowledge of housing issues to inform the session, which worked well. A further two sessions have been held on poverty and debt and fuel poverty. Both of these sessions involved working with organisations and people with lived experience to hear about the impact of these issues on their daily lives and what they considered could be done to help. These sessions had to be handled sensitively as they were recalling their trauma in sharing their views. The testimony provided was very powerful and has helped to inform future work. Although, fuel poverty falls within the remit of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, the committees have worked together to scrutinise the Scottish Government's draft Tackling Fuel Poverty Strategy from their different perspectives.

The **Finance and Public Administration Committee** has circulated guidance for subject committees to support them in their scrutiny of the framework for a resource spending review and Medium-Term Financial Strategy being published alongside the Scottish Budget 2022-23 on 9 December. The Committee has begun taking evidence in relation to the Scottish Budget 2022-23 and expects to publish its report in mid-January 2022. It's also agreed to undertake a short focused inquiry with a view to influencing the outcomes of the resource spending review and to conduct a content review of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), as recommended by last session's legacy expert panel.

In terms of non-finance areas of its remit, the Committee has been holding initial evidence sessions on the National Performance Framework, public service reform and public administration. It's due to take evidence from the Deputy First Minister on 25 January on the Scottish Government's update to Parliament on progress towards meeting objectives in its Implementation Plan and an updated complaints policy arising from last session's harassment reviews.

The inquiry into Scotland's supply chains is ongoing. The **Economy and Fair Work Committee** has repeated an invitation to the UK Government to give evidence after the first one was refused at late notice. In addition to the supply chains inquiry, the Committee will shortly consider the Subsidy Control Bill LCM. It has sought views and will hold an evidence session on the implications of the Bill for Scotland. The Committee expects to scrutinise common frameworks due to be presented shortly. The Committee will shortly consider its work programme to decide its focus for the first part of 2022.

The **Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee** is currently making plans for its consideration of the Draft Fourth National Planning Framework (NPF4). The Committee is working collaboratively with other committees to ensure that all aspects of NPF4 are properly scrutinised. The Committee has issued a call for views and is looking to develop an approach, working with external partners, to ensure that it hears from a broad range of voices. The Committee is also looking to hear from young people to understand the places they want to live in and is inviting young people to contribute their thoughts in different formats including by submitting drawings and videos. As well as NPF4, the Committee is also looking at the issue of retrofitting housing for net-zero. The Committee held a one-off session on this and informed it by also undertaking a visit to a retrofit project in Glasgow. The Committee will be holding a chamber debate on this issue in January. Finally, this month the Committee will be taking evidence on the short-term lets regulations, which have recently been laid. The Committee issued a call for views prior to the laying of the regulations and received more than 2500 responses.

**The Digital Engagement Tools Team** (a cross-cutting team including Participation and Communities Team, Committee Office, Parliamentary Communications Office and SPICe) has been using the Your Priorities digital platform to source questions and issues from the public to support the work of the **Covid-19 Recovery Committee** in questioning Ministers. The Committee has received over 60 questions from the public, raised 16 in meetings with ministers and officials, and used other key themes to support their questioning. After being asked a question from the public in the Committee meeting Professor Jason Leitch, National Clinical Director at the Scottish Government said: "I genuinely think that that is a really good question. I should also say that I like the committee's innovation". In such a fast-paced policy environment, this is proving an effective way of reflecting public views and concerns in the committee's work in a flexible and light-touch way.

## **SPICe**

### **COP, Climate Change and Sustainable Development Scrutiny**

- During COP26, SPICe produced 13 blogs and one briefing in English, French and Spanish as three of the working languages of the UN.
- SPICe has interest from the United Nations and International Institute for Sustainable Development in our approach to sustainable development scrutiny, and the Sustainable Development Impacts Assessment Tool.

## Briefings

- SPICe is further developing our use of data science techniques, including interactive dashboards. We have included one in a recent blog, [Where can I get a bus? – SPICe Spotlight | Solas air SPICe \(spice-spotlight.scot\)](#). The dashboard allows MSPs to interact with the data to see what access to buses is like within their constituency or within the constituencies in their region. Constituencies are divided into data zones, and drilling down to data zone level quickly illustrates the difference within a constituency in terms of access to buses by level of deprivation.
- SPICe has published a briefing [Child Poverty in Scotland since the 1960s](#) – the briefing covers a long swathe of history and draws together the impact of different administrations on child poverty. This briefing received exceptionally high engagement levels on social media.
- As an indicator of levels of rising levels of engagement in the work of committees (and the quickening in pace in committee-referred work) there were 2578 responses to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee survey on Scottish Government plans to introduce a licensing scheme for short-term let accommodation (AirBnBs). Time available for SPICe analysis was roughly three weeks, during which NPF4 was published which is a major area of interest for a number of subject committees. The short-term let [summary](#) has been published on the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee page.

## Conveners Group

At its previous meeting, the Conveners Group discussed issues around programming of parliamentary business and other matters relating to the operation of committees with the Minister for Parliamentary Business. It is planned to hold similar sessions with the Minister throughout the session on an annual basis.

The Group arranged to hold the first of its twice-yearly sessions with the First Minister on 15 December. This session was planned to focus around the themes of Net Zero and Covid-19. The preference is for the session to take place in person and so, following the recent decision that the default is for all committee meetings to be held in virtual format, the session has been postponed until such time that it can be held safely in person.

## **Parliamentary Services**

### **Engagement and Communications**

#### **Events and Exhibitions Team**

On Thursday 11 November, the Presiding Officer was joined by the Deputy Presiding Officers, the party leaders or their representatives and the Clerk/Chief Executive on the Garden Lobby steps to observe the Two-minute silence on **Remembrance Day**. They were joined by Lance Corporal Tom Medhurst-Feeney, Bugler, The Royal Regiment of Scotland who performed The Last Post and Reveille and Stuart McMillan MSP piped Flowers of the Forest to conclude proceedings.

On Thursday 25 November, the Presiding Officer was joined by the Deputy Presiding Officers, the party leaders or their representatives and the Clerk/Chief Executive on the Garden Lobby steps to observe a One-Minute Silence for **UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women** and mark the 16 Days of Activism to end violence against women – the global campaign against gender-based violence. This year marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 16 Days of Activism Global Campaign.

The Presiding Officer along with the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery and Mandy Rhodes, Editor of Holyrood Magazine co-hosted the annual **Scottish Public Services Awards 2021** that took place in the Garden Lobby on Wednesday 8 December. The Awards celebrate excellence within Scotland's public service and recognise the rich and unique diversity of public life in Scotland and the vital relationships that cut across departmental, geographic and institutional boundaries. The Clerk/Chief Executive presented the Leadership Award and the Presiding Officer presented the Lifetime Achievement award.

#### **Visitor Services**

**Tours and talks** for Members' guests and authorised pre-booked visitors continued during November and December, including constituents from around Scotland, students studying the architecture of Enric Miralles and representatives of the Californian legislature.

The **Parliament Shop** reopened with reduced opening hours on business days, to passholders and pre-booked visitors.

In December the corporate **Christmas card** was published with both a printed and digital version, featuring an illustration of the parliament building in the snow. Earlier years' printed versions were also made available in the Shop, to reduce waste and to increase the selection available to Members.

## **International engagement**

The International Relations Office supported:

- the Presiding Officer at a meeting with the new US Consul General
- members of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee at a meeting with members of the California State Senate.
- members of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee at a meeting with the Baden-Württemberg Minister of the Environment, Climate and Energy
- the Presiding Officer at a meeting with the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA):
- the Presiding Officer at a meeting with the Quebec Minister of the Environment
- the Presiding Officer at a meeting with the Speaker of the Maldives Parliament
- the Presiding Officer at a meeting with the Speaker of the Tuvalu Parliament
- the Presiding Officer at a meeting with Senator Galvez of the Canadian Senate
- the Presiding Officer at a meeting with the Governor of Punjab
- the Presiding Officer record an introduction to an online seminar on Enric Miralles and the architecture of the Parliament hosted by the Spanish Consulate General
- Jeremy Balfour MSP at a CPA Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities regional group meeting.
- Sarah Boyack MSP and Elena Whitham MSP at a CPA Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians regional group meeting.

## **Digital Services**

In light of the updated staff cost provision available since the start of session 6, the BIT Office has updated its policy on mobile device allocation for Members. Previously Members were entitled to up to four mobile devices (tablets and smartphones) for use by themselves and their staff to undertake

parliamentary business. This has been increased to five mobile devices and was budgeted for as part of the staff cost provision changes.

## **Information Management and Governance**

This calendar year has seen a substantial increase in the number of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests received by the SPCB. To date we have received 286 requests and we anticipate that the overall figure for the year will exceed 300 requests, which makes it one of the busiest years since records began in 2004. Thanks to the work of the Information Management & Governance team, supported by colleagues across the organisation, we have managed to achieve a high level of performance with detailed and informed replies being issued to deadline in response to often complex and high profile requests. This has been reflected in the thanks that we have received from requesters and is also illustrated by the fact that throughout the year we have been challenged on review on only 10 occasions.

We are currently waiting for the outcome of two applications to the Scottish Information Commissioner from the same requester. We have taken a robust approach in support of our use of relevant exemptions for these applications and we will of course take on board any decision of the Commissioner to help inform us on handling similar requests in the future.

We have also received a high number of requests from individuals under the Data Protection Act with 18 data subject access requests to date, all of which have been responded to by the statutory deadline with no complaints to the Information Commissioner's Office. Overall 2021 has been a demanding year in respect of the high volumes of work generated by these requests and the complexity of some of the issues we have faced and I am grateful to staff for their efforts.

## **People and Culture**

### **Wellbeing Week**

A full programme of health and wellbeing sessions took place throughout week beginning 22 November. 26 sessions were hosted by both internal and external facilitators. 386 places were taken up by 160 individuals. This number includes 50 MSP staff and a small number of MSPs. The programme offered sessions for MSPs' staff to attend and discuss wellbeing and the specific challenges faced by them. The 'Ask the Expert' was our most attended session which focussed on dealing with distressing and suicidal interactions. Further sessions on this will be available as part of the corporate programme. People and Culture continue to support staff who are experiencing specific challenges through counselling sessions and other interventions, as agreed with their employers.



## **Positive about Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy**

Since the SPCB approved the Positive about Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy on 4 November, People and Culture have been working with parliamentary groups to develop bespoke plans to implement the policy. The purpose of these discussions is to ensure that MSPs are supported to meet their obligations as employers. This includes setting out a plan for implementing the policy to foster and embed a culture that is informed, understanding and inclusive. The next step is to develop guidance to accompany the policy which will take account of current circumstances and the impact this can have on mental health.

## **MSP staff development programme**

The development programme supports existing and new staff through a multitude of different topics covering induction, wellbeing, mental health, job related training and CPD. Following the Election we have delivered over 60 sessions covering 20+ topics to an audience of over 1000 staff. The initial programme was developed using a robust training needs analysis and feedback from MSP staff through one to one interviews. The future of the development programme will be shaped through the same methods supported by evaluation completed throughout the year.