

## **Note of focus group sessions with MSPs**

The Committee held five focus group sessions with MSPs as part of the inquiry. The following MSPs attended the meetings:

### **1 March 2022**

Jackson Carlaw

Murdo Fraser

Jenni Minto

### **10 March 2022**

Ariane Burgess,

Paul McLennan

Stuart McMillan

Audrey Nicoll

Alexander Stewart

### **16 March 2022**

Graham Simpson

Brian Whittle

Rhoda Grant

John Mason

Emma Roddick

Edward Mountain

Willie Coffey

### **24 March 2022**

Maree Todd

### **Survey response**

In addition 24 members responded to the survey. While some did this anonymously, those listed below provided their names.

Jackson Carlaw  
Siobhan Brown  
Bill Kidd  
Jermei Balfour  
Sharon Dowey  
Emma Roddick  
John Mason  
Colin Beattie  
Sue Webber  
Paul McLennan  
Stephen Kerr  
Neil Bibby  
Maggie Chapman  
Clare Anne Adamson

### **Summary of views expressed in focus groups**

**Q.1 - While plans are in place to use a new platform that will allow for interventions to be made and taken in the Chamber, do you have any other views on the impact of hybrid meetings on debate and parliamentary scrutiny?**

Some members were of the view that debating was the aspect of parliamentary proceedings in the Chamber that was the least successful in a hybrid format. It was highlighted that there was a reason for having a debating Chamber as it brought people together to debate and had a particular culture and atmosphere. Reference was made to the difficulty in reading the room and when some members were participating virtually. It was also felt that there was an increased tendency for pre-prepared speeches to be read out by members rather than contributions which responded to those from other members.

One member reflected that it would not be possible to replicate the chamber through a hybrid system.

It was generally considered that more discipline was required for hybrid meetings.

Less concern was expressed about questions and voting. The ability to vote remotely was largely seen as positive and providing flexibility in a range of scenarios.

A number of members considered that standardised parliamentary backdrops would improve the visual characteristics of those participating virtually and make it clearer that the members were participating in parliamentary proceedings.

There was concern expressed about the level of scrutiny of the Government in a hybrid format.

Attention was drawn to other technical problems that could arise. These included the poor quality of audio and connectivity problems. Questions were raised about improvements that could be made to the equipment and infrastructure used by members in order to improve the overall quality of virtual proceedings both for other members in the Chamber and for those watching the broadcast.

It was pointed out that consideration should also be given in developing any approach to hybrid meetings to the circumstances in which members participate virtually so that people might feel more encouraged to stand for election in the future. More flexible arrangements for participating in parliamentary business could help ensure that the Parliament was more open to a diverse range of potential candidates and that those representing remote areas were better able to balance parliamentary, constituency and personal commitments.

It was emphasised that if hybrid meetings were to continue, it was important to ensure as far as possible that those participating virtually had a similar experience to those participating in person (notably that they should be able to make and take interventions). It was regarded as important that the experience should be as similar as possible.

While the limitations of hybrid meetings for scrutiny were recognised, it was considered that it was better to try and improve the process rather than rejecting it.

The view was expressed that continual improvements should be sought in the virtual platform with improvements in technology.

**Q.2 - What is your view on the format in which the Chamber and committees should meet in the future (i.e. should there be a continuation of hybrid meetings)?**

A distinction was drawn between Chamber and Committee meetings. Notably, significant advantages were perceived in hybrid committees as it facilitated the participation of witnesses. One member described this as “transformative”.

It was recognised that were environmental and resource advantages of hybrid meetings. Witnesses were no longer required to travel, stay overnight etc.

It was considered preferable to have a minister in the committee room when the Committee for scrutiny purposes.

It was recognised that there could be challenges in convening a hybrid Committee meeting and that it was harder to monitor the room to identify the interest of members in pursuing particular points. Some members emphasised the increased discipline that was required for a hybrid committee meeting.

There was considerable support for the continuation of hybrid arrangements.

It was suggested that it was an “old way of thinking” that members had to come to the Parliament to participate. The potential to participate virtually would provide a strong and powerful message that there was no need to travel. From this perspective, there was resistance to an approach whereby it would only be in certain exceptional circumstances that a member shouldn't be in the Parliament.

The view was expressed that Parliament was a coming together of MSPs wherever they are – physically or virtually. The location of individual members was not important as it was the coming together that mattered.

Concern was expressed about the Parliament looking empty in a hybrid meeting and the impression that this would make.

Some discussion took place about whether the Parliament was really “family friendly”. Late decision times, events and CPGs meant that an MSP's day rarely ended at 17:00. Particular attention was drawn to the difficulty in having family commitments if you represented a northern region or constituency.

It was pointed out that hybrid meetings would reduce the Parliament's carbon footprint.

The importance of being at Holyrood was stressed for developing the relationships that were so important for MSPs. This included party colleagues and other MSPs and the casual conversations that could be so important in developing initiatives. Reference was also made to the opportunity to have contact with Ministers in the Chamber and being able to take constituency issues to them directly.

The potential for unintended consequences was also pointed out. For example, if those MSPs who lived further away came to the Parliament less frequently would they become “second class” MSPs/ Would they be able to represent their constituents in the same way?

Concern was expressed about the danger of creating a culture that excluded those members who participated virtually on a regular basis.

It would now be retrograde to move back from having hybrid meetings

### **Q.3 - If hybrid meetings continued, in what circumstances should Chamber and committee meetings take place in a hybrid format?**

There was some discussion about the circumstances in which members had been required by their business managers to participate in parliamentary business prior to the pandemic. Some mentioned missing important family events such as funerals or graduation ceremonies due to the need to be in the Chamber to vote.

MSPs face significant challenges, notably the need to represent their constituents can be particularly challenging if in a large region or distant constituency. There was a general view that more flexibility for MSPs from these areas was justifiable.

It was also pointed out that in the past members could be inhibited from representing the Parliament at external events or on international visits or bodies due to the requirement to be in the Chamber to vote.

Some considered that there should be a reason for members participating in a hybrid format. One member suggested that the Parliament would be undermined if only a small number of members were present in the Chamber.

If members could participate in a hybrid way, there would need to be discipline in the system to ensure that it wasn't abused although it was recognised that the majority of MSPs were very dedicated and the Parliament was where they wanted to be.

A hybrid model was seen as being really helpful and it was recognised that some MSPs had stood down in the past due to the demands of travelling

The point was made that MSPs are people and have lives, that they could become ill, have ill family members, have family events etc.

#### **Q.4 - If hybrid meetings continued, in what circumstances should MSPs be able to participate virtually in parliamentary meetings?**

There were mixed views on the circumstances in which a Member should be able to participate in proceedings virtually.

Some members were of the view that MSPs should be in the Chamber apart from geography, illness or family commitments. The Chamber was perceived as central to parliamentary proceedings and that participation in the Chamber was central to successful debate and scrutiny.

The hybrid formats were welcomed by those that had to travel long distances to the Parliament. In particular, it was pointed out that the hybrid format provided flexibility when weather conditions made travelling hard.

Some were of the view that members should be in the Chamber as it was their job.

A question arose as to how any approach to members participating virtually should be managed – should it be by business managers or by the PO. Should members be required to submit any supporting evidence?

It was suggested that any introduction of criteria in relation to participating virtually could be piloted.

Some were of the view that decisions should be left to the judgment of party whips. Members should be trusted to represent their constituencies and their parties.

An opportunity for Members to change the world of work by setting an example was identified.

The need for balance between constituency and parliamentary work was stressed.

**Q.5 - If hybrid meetings continue, should the circumstances in which Ministers participate virtually be the same as the circumstances for MSPs?**

Many Members considered that there should be higher expectations in relation to Ministers and Cabinet Secretaries appearing in the Chamber in order to ensure scrutiny. In particular, it was highlighted that Ministers should not be participating virtually from their parliamentary offices.

However, it was also pointed out that the hybrid arrangements provided important flexibility to Ministers or Cabinet Secretaries when they faced difficult circumstances. For example, the flexibility of being able to participate virtually on occasion would allow them to balance personal and ministerial/parliamentary commitments, for example caring commitments or illness. It was also pointed out that placing different requirements on Ministers could deter members from seeking or accepting a ministerial appointment if they could not commit to always being available to be present in the Chamber. This could apply to Members with parental responsibilities or Members with disabilities.

It was pointed out that Ministers might have medical conditions that they didn't want to share with people. If you introduce a barrier then you are discriminating against those who cannot participate.

It was not appropriate to ask for reasons from disabled people about why they want to participate in a hybrid format (or use a proxy vote).

The view was expressed that there was less reason for a Minister not to be present. Some thought that Ministers should only be absent in exceptional circumstances. They needed to be present to show their respect to the Parliament.

**Q.6 - What are your views on whether virtual voting should continue or not?**

There was some discussion about when voting should take place. There was some discussion of the benefits that might derive from holding decision time at the start of business on the following day.

Some members raised the difficulties of decision time being moved and the preference for greater certainty for members on the time of decision time. The changes to decision time were perceived to be disruptive.

Questions were posed about the time required for virtual votes and whether that could be improved [NB since the Easter recess the time for votes has been reduced]. There was a view that the remote voting system needed to be slicker.

#### **Q.7 - What are your views on proxy voting?**

The question was raised about how proxy voting would work from a practical perspective with remote voting in the Chamber. A need for a framework for how proxy voting would work was needed as a basis for considering the introduction of proxy voting.

It was considered that there was a need to identify a system and for members to be able to give views on that system. That system needed to be robust.

It was generally considered that there should be certain circumstances under which a proxy vote could be used. Reference was made to parental leave, illness and bereavement as all being circumstances in which a proxy vote could be used. Using a proxy vote should not be a standard means of voting.

Certain circumstances under which proxy voting would be helpful, but should not be the norm.

It should be up to the individual to decide who exercises their proxy vote.

It was considered important to watch and participate in debates before voting.

It was recognised that there could be a tension between usefulness of proxy vote and constituents feeling un-represented.

#### **Q.8 - Are there any other procedural improvements that you would like to see?**

One member reflected that parliamentary business fits the timetable and the timetable does not fit the business. There was a call for business to be more relaxed and responsive.

Concern was expressed about the number of pre-prepared speeches and that the time limits either curtailed or prolonged debates.

#### **Q.9 - Do you have any views on whether or not committee witnesses should be able to participate virtually?**

It was widely seen as beneficial for witnesses to be able to participate remotely.

In particular, this helped committees to engage more widely and secure international witnesses and support vulnerable witnesses who might not want to appear before a committee in person.

**Other issues**

CPGs have also benefited from being hybrid. Hybrid meetings support problem of not being able to travel.