

**Chief Executive's Report  
to the SPCB May 2020**

# Introduction

This report looks at activities across the organisation from late April to the end of May.

Much of this report will focus on the work being done around the organisation to facilitate parliamentary business in the face of Covid-19. Please note however that this is not an exhaustive list and that every business area has been working extremely hard to tackle the current challenges and facilitate parliamentary business in these difficult times.

Items include:

- Several temporary variations to the Standing Orders have been agreed by the Parliament for the duration of the public response to Covid-19.
- The Parliament's committees have continued to work throughout the current crisis, with weekly virtual meetings being the new norm.
- The temporary homeworking policy to support Members, Members' Staff and SPS Staff working from home was launched on 20 March.
- The Incident Communications Team has continued to coordinate all internal and external communications on the Parliament's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, including a live event in late April where I addressed all staff.
- SPICe has continued to provide a full research and information service throughout the Covid-19 pandemic to individual Members and to parliamentary committees.
- Three new NGBU-drafted Members' Bills have been introduced and two more NGBU-drafted Members' Bills are due for introduction by the 1 June deadline.

**David McGill**  
Clerk/Chief Executive

# Overview of parliamentary activities

## Parliamentary Business

The work of the Legislation and Parliamentary Business Group had continued to be largely focussed on the delivery of parliamentary business in new and varied ways in the light of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

## Temporary Changes to Standing Orders

A number of temporary variations to the Standing Orders have been agreed by the Parliament for the duration of the public response to Covid-19. To aid transparency a [document](#) compiling the Standing Orders Rules which have been suspended or varied has been added to the Standing Order webpage. The Presiding Officer has written to the Convener of Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee to ask that these changes are kept under review.

## Virtual and hybrid meetings

The changes, among other things, allow for virtual and hybrid meetings of the Parliament. Following a number of special virtual question time sessions, starting in the Easter recess, the first formal virtual meeting took place on 7 May, at the point at which it was possible for all members to join remotely. The first hybrid meeting took place a few days later on 19 May. The capacity to support virtual committee meetings has also been increased and will be increased further in early June.

Work is also underway on procedures and a technological solution to allow remote voting for Chamber business and members have been involved in testing. The system being tested has been developed by BIT using technologies already deployed at the Parliament. Other voting methods continue to be explored and members have been consulted on options for proxy voting.

## Legislation

In terms of legislative scrutiny, significant resources have been deployed to support the Parliament's consideration of the Coronavirus (Scotland) (No.2) Bill. This Bill was introduced on 11 May, following a truncated 3-week period during which clerks and solicitors made the necessary arrangements for scrutiny and prepared legal and procedural advice.

The Bill was subsequently designated as an emergency bill and a bespoke timetable was agreed. Following consideration by the Covid-19 Committee during a virtual meeting, the Bill was passed at Stage 1 on 11 May.

Legislation Team clerks assisted members in preparing a significant number of amendments to give effect to their policy intentions ahead of the Stage 2

meeting which took place on 19 May. In another parliamentary first, the Covid-19 Committee disposed of those amendments at a virtual meeting making use of the electronic voting system provided on the virtual meeting platform. The virtual Stage 2 approach was rehearsed in advance, firstly by clerks and technical staff and subsequently by committee Members. The Stage 2 meeting, supported by committee and legislation team clerks, took in excess of six hours. As a consequence, the deadline for Stage 2 amendments, which had been scheduled to fall the same day, had to be adjusted to the morning of the Stage 3 meeting (the following day). Again, legislation clerks worked at speed to draft and process a large volume of amendments and prepare the necessary procedural documents. Parliamentary solicitors also had to turn around protected subject matter advice in an extremely short period of time.

The Bill completed its passage after a further 3.5 hours of consideration of Stage 3 amendments, followed by the debate on a motion that the Bill be passed. It is expected to receive Royal Assent around Tuesday 26 May.

## Members' Bills

In non-coronavirus work, since mid-April, three new NGBU-drafted Members' Bills have been introduced and two more NGBU-drafted Members' Bills are due for introduction by the 1 June deadline. Those are all seven of the Bills that NGBU committed to complete in the paper considered by the SPCB in autumn 2019. NGBU is also working with committee teams on three Committee Bills – one for the Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee and two for the SPPA Committee (on Short Money and changes to the process for making complaints against MSPs, both to give effect to decisions of the SPCB).

## Lobbying Register

The Lobbying Register Team continues to fully function, and the team remains available online to deal with any issues that registrants may have. The team has taken the opportunity to participate in two webinars, originally scheduled as seminars, arranged by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) and the Association of Scottish Public Affairs (ASPA) to increase awareness of the register and the obligations of lobbyists under the Act.

## Committees

Committee work has continued throughout the current crisis, with weekly virtual meetings being the new norm. In adapting to these new ways of working, the Covid-19 pandemic has become the focus of much of their work.

A new Covid-19 Committee was established to consider and report on the Scottish Government's response to the crisis overall. Other committees are seeking views and taking evidence on the impact of the pandemic within their remits. This is being done through both formal public meetings and by seeking views and information through calls for evidence. For example, the Equalities and Human Rights Committee's inquiry into the impact of the pandemic on equalities and human rights has received an excellent response on Twitter,

while the Education and Skills Committee held a number of focus groups with teachers on the 2020 exam diet which fed into a formal evidence session with the Scottish Qualifications Authority. This reached 130,000 Facebook accounts and was viewed by over 5,000 people.

The first virtual Stage 2 proceedings was also undertaken by the Covid-19 Committee on the Coronavirus (Scotland) (No 2) Bill.

## Parliamentary Services

### Temporary Homeworking

Scottish Government advice remains that, where staff can work from home, they should continue to do so. On 20 March we launched our Temporary Homeworking Policy to support Members, Members' Staff and SPS Staff working from home as a result of Covid-19.

While our priority has been to support people with health conditions in the first instance, making adjustments to their home working environment, our Health and Safety Adviser has been working closely with colleagues in BIT and FM to make sure that other colleagues can also benefit from reviewing their home working facilities and equipment.

### Around the building

Officials are now focusing attention on safe working practices in the Parliament building in preparation for the easing of lockdown restrictions. An extensive piece of work is now underway to risk assess access control and movement throughout the building, with a view to making some initial recommendations by the end of May as to how safe working can be achieved. Guidance will also be prepared for Members and their staff to support them in implementing safe working practices at their local offices.

## Coronavirus Communications

The Incident Communications Team has continued to coordinate all internal and external communications on the Parliament's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This has involved ensuring that practical advice and information for MSPs and their staff, SPS staff and contractors has been joined up and are consistent, meeting all users' needs. As part of this, a staff wellbeing survey, in conjunction with HR, has been launched to ensure staff views are heard during these times.

In late April, the team assisted me in hosting a live event via Microsoft Teams to address Parliament staff and are now facilitating me in further virtual meetings with smaller groups of staff across the Parliament.

The focus of our external communications has been on how the Parliament is innovating and adapting to continue to function (both remotely and in Holyrood),

as well as promoting business and scrutiny. This has included highlighting the establishment of the new Covid-19 Committee, the introduction of virtual questions, the recent hybrid parliament changes and liaison with broadcasters to ensure that timing of parliamentary business, particularly FMQs, was communicated to them with sufficient notice. The Presiding Officer himself has undertaken a significant programme of media engagement in this regard and the team has been providing support accordingly.

We are also looking for opportunities to stream as much relevant parliamentary business on social media, either live or using key clips after the meetings. These can be a particularly effective way of dealing with specific audiences who would normally be at work when meetings are taking place. As an example, we streamed the Education and Skills Committee's meeting on 4th May (with the head of SQA) on Facebook. The post had a reach of more than 130,000 and gained 700 engagements (shares, likes or comments), considerably higher than previous figures.

Using Microsoft Teams, the Web and Social Media Team has also recorded interviews with the Presiding Officer, the new Deputy Presiding Officer, and with several committee conveners. These have been promoted on social media and issued as podcasts. The "at home" style recordings, which are edited and captioned, allow us to present what can be complex messages with a more informal touch. Feedback from those taking part has also been positive; Members have adapted quickly and tell us that they find this method of recording easy and stress free.

## Public Information

The Public Information and Resources team has continued to run a full service during the coronavirus pandemic, including the public enquiry service, despite the parliament building and the switchboard being closed. As well as email and live chat, the team is also able to respond to telephone enquiries using a voicemail inbox.

## British Sign Language

Two new videos were released in April in British Sign Language. 'Your Representatives' explains the different elected representatives that people in Scotland have and the issues they can deal with; and 'A BSL User's Guide' provides information on what the Scottish Parliament can offer to deaf and deafblind BSL users who want to visit, learn more or get involved. Both are important contributions to the delivery of the actions in the SPCB's BSL Plan. These videos are available on the BSL pages on the website and were promoted through the Parliament's BSL Facebook group.

## SPICe

SPICe has continued to provide a full research and information service throughout the Covid-19 pandemic to individual Members and to parliamentary committees.

In the period covered by this report, SPICe has published more than 20 blog articles on different aspects of Covid-19 and the policy response; detailed frequently asked questions articles on health and on social care issues; as well as an examination of the wider economic impacts of the pandemic.

SPICe also produced a briefing on the Coronavirus Bill (Scotland) (No 2) Bill, published on 11 May, in time for the Covid-19 Committee session on the morning of 12 May and – to a very tight turnaround – a blog setting out the Stage 2 amendments in time for Stage 3 consideration on 20 May.

In addition to the wide range of subject-specific material, SPICe also publishes three regularly updated posts to inform both Members and the public:

- details of trusted and official sources of information;
- a summary of the high-level statistics on Coronavirus (Covid-19) in Scotland; and
- on 1 May SPICe introduced a new timeline on Scotland's response to the pandemic.

The Parliament put out a call for experts on different policy issues relating to COVID-19. That call has now closed and 180 experts have registered an interest in helping both the Parliament and Scottish Government. The register sits with SPICe for GDPR purposes, and can be used, for example, in identifying potential committee witnesses, or in providing informal advice.

## International Relations

The International Relations Office supported discussions, via video call, between the Presiding Officer and colleagues from several legislatures around the world. The discussions focused on the Parliament's response to Covid-19, remote participation and meetings, and remote/proxy voting. Discussions took place with:

- François Paradis MNA, President of the National Assembly of Quebec;
- Steingrímur J. Sigfússon MP, Speaker of the Icelandic Parliament and Silja Dögg Gunnarsdóttir MP, President of the Nordic Council;
- Ilse Aigner MdL, President of the Bavarian State Parliament; and
- Dr Gabriele Andretta MdL, President of the State Parliament of Lower Saxony.