



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Switchboard opening hours

7 March 2024

Reference: SPCB (2024) Paper 21

Executive summary

1. In December 2023, we informed the SPCB of the need to adjust the opening hours of the switchboard given staff absences. This paper updates the SPCB on the switchboard hours and outlines our intention to extend the arrangement.

Issues and options

2. The switchboard function is delivered by the Public Information team within the Public Engagement Services Office. They also handle public enquiries and a range of other responsibilities.
3. Historically, the service has been offered from 08.30-17.00 Tuesday-Thursday and 10.00-17.00 Mondays and Fridays during business periods, and 10.00-17.00 Monday-Friday during recess.
4. In December 2023, we informed the SPCB that switchboard would operate on a 10.00-16.00 basis Monday to Friday (exception: Thursday 09.00-16.00 for FMQ tickets) from December 2023 to end of February 2024 owing to staff absences. Our voicemail service (which is in operation on weekdays when the staffed service is closed) is not indicating that there is a strong demand for switchboard outside of the current opening hours and we have had no complaints.
5. This has helped the team enormously whilst they are managing with fewer staff available. As well as helping to maintain a manageable schedule for 3 staff rather than 5, it creates space for them to undertake tasks that require focus. This includes a rise in increasingly complex enquiries and enquirers, a trend observed in other Parliaments as well as in support services. Additionally, the team is processing more requests for language and format support from Committees, Chamber and MSPs. In 2019, for example, there were no requests for Easy Read – the format used when engaging with adults with learning disabilities. In 2023, the team supported 15 requests.

6. Whilst the system does not monitor the number of 'drop off' calls – calls that come in but are not answered out of hours – callers are not raising the opening hours as an issue in calls or in voicemails. Additionally, we know that the most vulnerable in society with little access to online information tend to remain landline users and voicemail offers them the ability to leave messages and have calls returned.
7. In the long run, trends indicate switchboard demand will fall over the years as more public and internal users switch to alternative and / or direct methods of contact with MSPs and Parliament teams.
8. One of the staff absences is continuing and we need to extend the reduced hours until the end of March. Given the benefits we think the reduced hours could offer the team in terms of the increasing and wider work they undertake, and the potential for future efficiencies, we think the opportunity / cost of the reduced hours merits more investigation once the team is back to full complement.
9. We are therefore intending to extend the arrangement until the end of the summer recess to allow us time to explore the gains we can make.

Resource implications

10. There are no costs or savings at this time from this change to hours. Extending the period of reduction will allow us to explore this fully and make a decision for the start of the September Parliamentary term.

Publication Scheme

11. This paper can be published in line with the SPCB's publication scheme.

Decision

12. The views of the SPCB on this matter are appreciated as part of our work to determine how the switchboard should operate in the short, medium and longer term as we look to session 7.

Public Engagement Services Office

28 February