

## Commission on Parliamentary Reform

### North East Scotland Chief Executives Forum

Tuesday 28 February 2017

Following introductions from the Chair and the Chief Executive of Aberdeen City Council, **we asked: How have you engaged with the Scottish Parliament and what could make that engagement better; what are your priorities for improvements?**

#### **You said:**

- One area where more needs to be done is in relation to joined up scrutiny whether it is of cross cutting issues (which fall across Committees) or better scrutiny of services which might be collectively delivered across different public sector organisations and local government in an area.
- Parliamentary systems and structures might be improved if they better reflected place, with perhaps a regional focus where groups of MSPs met with public and private sector partners with a joint focus on working together to deliver outcomes for a particular area.
- It was suggested that Committee scrutiny might be enhanced if, in some circumstances, it had a spatial focus which would better reflect the different challenges which arise across Scotland (rather than grouping together similar public sector organisations from across Scotland).
- Clarity was needed about the role and responsibilities as well as the accountability and relationships between Local Government, the Scottish Parliament, UK Parliament and Scottish Government which would help the public understand which politician can assist them with their queries. This may also strengthen understanding of the Scottish Parliament but also help politicians better manage case work. It would assist Committees to better focus their scrutiny and understand the contribution that each part can make to that scrutiny. In that regard Chief Executives of Local Authorities are accountable to their elected representatives but also are keen to engage with the Parliament in terms of place and policy.
- The challenge of having some public sector organisation such as the health service directly accountable to the Scottish Parliament whilst others are not was highlighted as a continuing issue. The creation of Integrated Joint Boards had created such complexities with part of the partnership (such as the NHS membership) accountable to the Parliament through the Minister whilst the Local Authority membership was not.
- There were mixed views about how effectively Committee meetings are conducted – on some occasions partisan views of MSPs meant that the opportunity for a more detailed understanding of how issues affect different areas

of Scotland was missed with the focus being on political point scoring – sometimes at the witness' expense. It was also felt that on occasion chamber debates were used to unfairly and inappropriately criticise Local Authorities in relation to specific operational decisions or issues when such Local Authorities had no right of reply in the Chamber.

- There was general agreement that the Parliament was very open and accessible to visit and that the visitor experience was very welcoming (and vibrant).
- It was felt that there was a bit of a disconnect between the business that went on in the Chamber and that which went on in Committees.
- The scrutiny cycle isn't completely delivered with more focus needed on effective implementation. The budget work of Committees could be broadened from that of annual budget scrutiny to being part of scrutinising implementation or influencing legislation which should all then feed into budget scrutiny or into post legislative scrutiny.. Budget scrutiny is still carried out very much in Committee silos.
- Parliament is set up similar to the Scottish Government (such as Committees mirroring departments) whilst public sector bodies are more frequently working together to deliver outcomes for an area or place. It was questioned why Committees are structured by policy area whilst service delivery is focussed on place.
- In terms of Committee effectiveness the demands to provide written submissions are sometimes unreasonable given the frequency of requests, the impact on local resources and the extent to which submissions are meaningfully used by Committees;
- It was noted that the Parliament faced an increasing challenge posed by the work relating to the UK's exiting the European Union;
- Committee names and remits mirroring portfolios is less helpful and it was questioned whether longer term policy development or issues are being considered or debated to any great extent. It was felt that Committee turnover contributed to limited continuity of knowledge and it was not always clear which Committee member you might speak to if you disagreed with the Scottish Government's view. The local government model of a mix of policy Committees and area Committees might provide an alternative approach.
- It was suggested that local authorities could be clustered into place groups rather than receiving individual attention is a better way to engage- and it was suggested that having a Local Government Committee at the Scottish Parliament may add to the confusion about the accountability of the different tiers of government. Another suggestion as that Committees could seek evidence from all those who represent an area such as the local, authority, MSPs and MPs with a more collective approach to scrutiny;
- On a practical level the timings of networking events such as evening receptions meant that local authorities distant to the Parliament did not have the same opportunity to attend as those placed nearer which could be perceived as them

not being interested – it was suggested that perhaps such Parliamentary events could be held out with Edinburgh occasionally.

- A strong Parliament is needed to be able to say 'hold off doing that' to the Scottish Government and in that regard Parliament has to be the gatekeeper on whether legislation is needed (and if so whether it should be in primary legislation).