

International relations: overview 1 July – 31

December 2019

20 February 2020

Reference: SPCB(2020)Paper 7

Executive Summary

1. The International Strategy agreed by the SPCB in January 2017 stated that the International Relations Office (IRO) would produce a twice-yearly overview of core international work undertaken by the Scottish Parliament. This paper covers the period 1 July-31 December 2019.

Background

2. The IRO is responsible for the development and implementation of the International Strategy. While it facilitates most inward and outward international visits, it is not involved in every visit to or from the Parliament e.g. those undertaken by committees as part of an inquiry or by MSPs on cross party groups. This paper therefore does not reflect all the Parliament's international activity, only that supported by the IRO.
3. The current International Strategy built on the experiences and practices applied by the Parliament in developing its international relations approach. Its central focus remains, i.e. linking international work to the Strategic Plan (as well as highlighting work with other parliaments and through organisations with which the Parliament works).
4. The continued link to the priorities of the Strategic Plan has allowed the IRO to better plan outward activity, which in turn has led to a more efficient linking to resources. In short, the Parliament can more easily identify what it wants to do, why, and when. In addition, the case for an outward visit is supported by the opportunity to discuss with other legislatures policy issues which are of topical relevance to committees as well as other corporate priorities (which might cover matters of interest to the SPCB itself). It is these three components – policy, procedural, corporate – which form the 'business case' for IRO supported outward work.

Countries/parliaments/organisations

5. Annexed is a new infographic showing inward and outward visits in the period of this report. One graph provides a statistical comparison of visit numbers from the most recent six-month period to the previous. This new infographic also includes data on visit topics.
6. Some narrative on specific work is set out below.

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) Scotland Branch

7. Scotland Branch Members undertook the following CPA activities:

- Rhoda Grant MSP, Bill Bowman MSP and Neil Bibby MSP attended CPA British Isles and Mediterranean Region (BIMR) Election Observation Training in Westminster.
- Maureen Watt MSP participated in a post-election visit to Malawi.
- Margaret Mitchell MSP, Claire Baker MSP and Jenny Gilruth MSP attended the 6th BIMR Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) Conference.
- The Scotland Branch held its Annual General Meeting.
- Margaret Mitchell MSP and Stuart McMillan MSP attended the 64th Commonwealth Plenary Conference in Uganda.
- The Parliament hosted the BIMR CWP Steering Committee meeting which was attended by Margaret Mitchell MSP and Claire Baker MSP while Sarah Boyack MSP and Rhoda Grant MSP attended the presentations afterwards on culture of respect in Parliament and encouraging diversity of candidates.

British Irish Parliamentary Assembly

8. During the reporting period there was one plenary session in Warwickshire. Prior to the plenary session, Deputy Presiding Officer Linda Fabiani MSP (Scottish delegation lead) attended a meeting of the Steering Committee in Guernsey. Other planned subject committee meetings were postponed due to the UK parliamentary elections.

Outward visits

9. The following outward visits took place:

- The Presiding Officer; Ruth Maguire MSP (Convener, Equalities and Human Rights Committee); and Mark Ruskell MSP (Deputy Convener of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee) visited the Swedish Parliament in October 2019 for discussions on parliamentary reform and FGM.
- Deputy Presiding Officer Christine Grahame MSP; and Johann Lamont MSP (Convener, Public Petitions Committee) visited the Parliament of Flanders and the Chamber of Representatives of the Belgian Parliament in October 2019 for discussions on the work of committees; public petitions; and engagement.

Parliamentary strengthening

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD)

10. In response to the SPCB's discussion of the previous overview report, the IRO discussed with the WFD the scope for future collaboration with it around WFD programmed activity. The IRO will continue to consider carefully, when assessing any approach to engage in such programmed activity, the impact involvement would have on the wider responsibilities and priorities of Members

and officials and of the need to prioritise the Parliament's core international interests which the IRO supports.

Future reporting

11. In the first activity report submitted to the SPCB (November 2017), it was highlighted that the IRO would look at new methods of publicising the Parliament's international activity. The infographics attached are the latest idea by the IRO in this promotion. Improvements to the 'International Activity' webpage have been made through photos and more narrative around inward visits. The IRO Twitter account launched on 1 January 2019 now has over 1,700 followers and has proved very successful in not only showcasing the Parliament's international work but allowing the IRO to pick up information from other legislatures and international organisations and share with other offices in the Parliament.

Resource implications

12. There are no resource implications arising from this paper. All visits in this period were accommodated from within the IRO budget or from other sources e.g. the CPA.

Publication scheme

13. This paper will be published in line with the SPCB's Publication Scheme.

Decision

14. The SPCB is invited to note the activity undertaken across the second six months of 2019.

International Relations Office