

## Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

**Petition Number:** [PE1587](#)

**Main Petitioner:** Arthur McFarlane

**Subject:** Scottish Civic Forum

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to reinstate the Scottish Civic Forum and to fund the Forum at a level which will allow it to develop and succeed as an instrument of social cohesion and democratic governance in Scotland.

### Background

The Scottish Civic Forum (SCF) was established in response to a recommendation made in the 1998 [report of the Consultative Steering Group](#) (CSG). The CSG said:

“It is important that our proposals for a more open political process are paralleled by the development of appropriate institutions at different levels in Scottish society, to ensure meaningful dialogue between the Parliament and civic society. In this respect, we welcome proposals which were presented to us for a Civic Forum, which would be facilitative, recognise the plurality of voices and groups and take an active role in ensuring the effective involvement of groups traditionally excluded from the decision-making process. We endorse the proposals for a Civic Forum and encourage the proponents of such a Forum to develop the details of the role and funding arrangements for the Forum. We recommend that the Parliament should encourage Scottish civic society through the establishment and work of a Civic Forum and through other imaginative social partnership ventures. We see these as significant means of achieving an accessible Parliament within a participative democracy. Our endorsement of this proposal does not, of course, exclude the use of other means of engaging with the Parliament. It is important also to recognise the plurality of voices which exists in Scottish civic society and the establishment of a Civic Forum would not preclude the development of other social partnership ventures.”

The Scottish Executive provided core funding for the SCF from 1999 until March 2006. Detail of the funding was set out in response to [PQ S2W-7135](#), answered on 22 March 2004:

Year	Amount (£000)
1999-2000	40
2000-01	130
2001-02	130
2002-03	180
2003-04	200
2004-05	200

In addition, the Scottish Executive provided a further and final grant of £100,000 in 2005. This was intended to allow the SCF to “realign itself to the new environment and enable it to compete for specific civic participation work which the Scottish Executive, and others, may wish to commission”.

In February 2004, the Scottish Executive wrote to the Presiding Officer to inform him that it would be stopping its core funding of the SCF in March 2006.

A Members business debate was held on the funding of the SCF on [24 February 2005](#). The Scottish Executive set out its position:

“On 1 June 2000, the then Minister for Finance, Jack McConnell made it clear that the Civic Forum should not rely exclusively on Executive funding. He said:

“Its success will be measured by the credibility that it develops in civic Scotland, and by the funding that it attracts to replace the pump-priming support from the Executive.” [Official Report, 1 June 2000; Vol 6, c 1205.]

I gently suggest to colleagues that our approach—far from being an immediate step—has been clear for five years and, dare I say it, that the issue had to be dealt with at some stage. Last year was a year of transitional funding. That was made absolutely crystal clear; I assure colleagues that there was no question of any mixed message about the way in which we sought to engage with the Civic Forum on that issue. At this time, we consider that it is important for the body to move on in the way in which we have suggested.”

The Deputy Minister concluded by saying that:

“The Executive agrees that the relationship between the Scottish Civic Forum and Parliament is vital to the work of developing and promoting a participative democracy. [...] The Executive strongly supports the motion, which suggests that the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body should investigate the possibility of funding the forum.”

## **Scottish Government and the Forum since 2006**

The SCF appears to have received its final funding grant from the Scottish Government in 2008-09 for a project called [Sus It Out](#).

Although it ceased operating in 2009 the SCF continues to be cited as a consultee by the Scottish Government. For example, in 2010 [Consultation on the merger of Edinburgh College of Art with the University of Edinburgh](#), and in 2015 for the [consultation on the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974](#).

## **Scottish Parliament Action**

At its meeting on 22 June 2005, the SPCB discussed a paper on the SCF which advised the SPCB against committing itself to core-fund the SCF. The SPCB agreed that it would not core-fund the Civic Forum.

In November 2005, the Public Petitions Committee (PPC) considered [PE895](#), lodged by Dr James Crowther, calling for a parliamentary debate on the implications of the recent decisions by the Scottish Executive and Scottish Parliament Corporate Body regarding provision of funding to the SCF.

The Committee agreed to write to the Scottish Executive and to the SPCB.

The then Presiding Officer, George Reid, responded:

“I have consistently stated that in my view the Parliament does not have a role in providing core funding to bodies such as the Civic Forum. The position was reiterated by the Corporate Body when it considered the Forum’s request in June. It did agree, however, that the Forum could consider applying to undertake projects for the Scottish Parliament along with other organisations, and if successful, receive funding on a project basis.”

On 8 February 2006, the PPC agreed, on the basis of the [responses received](#), to close consideration of the petition.

On 6 November 2007, the PPC considered [PE1082](#) lodged by John Dowson which included a call for the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive to consider a proposal to reinstate funding to the Scottish Civic Forum at a level of at least £250,000 per annum.

The [Committee agreed](#) to seek responses to the petition from the new Scottish Government and the SPCB.

On 29 January 2008, the Committee discussed the [responses](#) it had received from the SPCB and the Government. The response from the SPCB outlined the Parliament's various outreach activities.

In its response, the Government confirmed that it had no plans to provide direct funding support for the SCF and that it was exploring a range of approaches to participation to identify the most effective ways of engaging communities in Scotland.

The [Committee agreed](#) to write to the Government seeking further information on its work on ways to improve community partnership, civic engagement and outreach work with civic groups and individuals throughout Scotland.

On 13 May 2008, following the [Government's further response](#) to the Committee and to the [petitioner](#), the [Committee agreed](#) to close consideration of the petition on the grounds that neither the Government nor the Parliament had plans to provide direct funding to the SCF and that both organisations had recently reviewed their consultation and participation practices.

## **Parliamentary outreach activities**

The Scottish Parliament has various outreach activities which it uses in order to reach groups traditionally excluded from the decision-making process.

At present, the Parliament is particularly interested in working with groups and individuals across Scotland to help [young people](#) find out how they can get involved in the work it does and how the Parliament can help them to make changes to the things that matter to them.

Another outreach activity is [Parliament Days](#), which were started in November 2012. One of the key aims of a Parliament Day is to inspire local people to take an interest in, and engage directly with, their MSPs and the Parliament. For each Parliament Day, a range of engagement activities are on offer, allowing local people to choose which best suits them.

**Francesca McGrath**  
**Senior Research Specialist**

4 December 2015

SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at [spice@scottish.parliament.uk](mailto:spice@scottish.parliament.uk)

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.