



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

# **Review of Scotland's Futures Forum**

## **12 December 2024**

**Reference: SPCB (2024) Paper 79**

### **Executive summary**

1. This paper sets out a proposed review of Scotland's Futures Forum.
2. Scotland's Futures Forum is nearly 20 years old and in that time the context in which it operates has changed significantly. It is therefore considered that it is timely to carry out a review to:
  - i. establish the evolving futures and foresight needs of the SPCB and key stakeholders
  - ii. place these in the context of relevant futures-led organisations in Scotland and beyond
  - iii. present a range of options to maximise impact and achieve the SPCB's long-term goals.
3. SPCB is invited to consider whether to undertake a review of Scotland's Futures Forum, and if so, comment on the scope, approach and governance of the review.

### **Issues and options**

#### **Background**

4. Scotland's Futures Forum is the Scottish Parliament's futures think-tank. It operates on a practical, rather than theoretical basis, across parties to develop the Parliament's capacity to think beyond the five-year electoral cycle, on the long-term challenges and opportunities that Scotland faces.
5. The Forum believes that our politicians must be good ancestors, acting to ensure that our descendants thrive on the planet, not colonising their future. How we think about the future comes from our own values and beliefs and the Forum seeks to provide opportunities and encouragement for diversity of thinking.

6. Aligning futures thinking and foresight methodologies with deliberative democracy enables parliamentary scrutiny to focus on long term consequences, identifying trends, risks and opportunities that might otherwise be overlooked. Futures methodologies are inherently participatory and creative, involving diverse stakeholders in imagining alternative futures; they also help to map out systemic interdependencies. Futures thinking inspires hope and agency by inviting participants to co-create visions of desirable futures.
7. The Forum promotes research and stimulates debate on the issues of tomorrow, through arranging discussions, workshops, seminars and other events and publishing reports, podcasts, blogs and think pieces highlighting fresh perspectives, ideas and creativity on how we might prepare now for the future. It works to make sense of the complexity that multiple futures presents.
8. For some years the Forum has been the main partner in the Festival of Politics. This has helped to broaden perspectives and discuss complex societal challenges. This alignment enhances public engagement and a more participatory democratic system capable of addressing the uncertainties of the future.
9. The Forum aims to inform MSPs, and those who work with them, challenging their thinking and enabling them to consider the effects of decisions taken today on Scotland's long-term future. It also aims to use its convening power to support long-term thinking by other organisations more broadly in Scotland.
10. Members find the Forum's events provide an opportunity hear alternative voices in an informal setting. Some attendees are subsequently invited to give evidence to committees and what is said in Forum events is drawn upon to question committee witnesses. The Forum supports cross committee working, such as the recent conference on housing and net zero with the [Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee](#) and the [Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee](#), prior to scrutinising the Scottish Government's revised Climate Change Plan.
11. The Futures Forum has a strong reputation outside of the Parliament. The conference celebrating 25 Years of the Scottish Parliament, looking to the challenges ahead, sold out within two days.
12. Scotland's Futures Forum was formally constituted as a company limited by guarantee, a subsidiary owned wholly by the SPCB, in August 2005. It has a very small staff based at Holyrood. While the Forum is permitted to undertake consultancy and seek grants, donations and other funding, recently the SPCB has provided 100% of the Forum's income, and funding and partnership working has enabled resources to be leveraged.

13. The work of the Forum is overseen by a Board of Directors, appointed by the SPCB and chaired by the Presiding Officer. It comprises four MSPs drawn from across the parties, and four other, non-MSP, Directors recruited to their voluntary position through advertising. As company directors, Board members are responsible for the governance, leadership and strategic direction of Scotland's Futures Forum and its programme of work. They appoint a Company Secretary who is usually a senior member of SPCB staff. The board brings a wealth of thought, leadership and expertise across all sectors of Scotland from urban planning to the arts to policy and to participatory democracy. Their curiosity, challenge and connections are key assets.

## **Proposal and approach**

14. The Forum has been reviewed several times in its lifetime, often towards the end of session, resulting in changes in staffing numbers, grades, responsibilities and employment status, refining its strategic priorities and making light touch changes to operating procedures.

15. Since the Forum was established in 2005 there have been significant changes in the global landscape and within the parliament itself. The primary objective of this proposed review is to evaluate whether the current think tank model continues to be the most effective vehicle for achieving the SPCB's strategic objectives, particularly in providing a futures and sense making perspective on key and emerging issues.

- i. This review proposes to: establish the evolving futures and foresight needs of the SPCB and key stakeholders
- ii. place these in the context of relevant futures-led organisations in Scotland and beyond
- iii. present a range of options to maximise impact and achieve the SPCB's long-term goals.

16. It is suggested that the review consist of three phases prior to implementation:

- i. Information gathering, purpose and strategic alignment (Jan-May 2025)

The review will engage with the Board, SPCB, members, members' staff and SPCB teams and staff to understand the current and future need for futures thinking and foresight within the Parliament, and how this contributes to the overall mission of the Parliament to inform, support scrutiny and influence policy and decision making. The review will also conduct a short, desk-based research piece, first looking briefly at a number of think tank definitions and formats before reviewing organisations and

initiatives around the globe that serve a similar purpose to Scotland's Futures Forum. This will include any emerging government approach to accountability, scrutiny and support for future generations outcomes. This data will inform phase 2. A report will be submitted to the SPCB who will take the decision to proceed to phase 2.

ii. Options (May-Sept 2025)

Based on the outcomes of the strategic conversation, this phase will explore the best fit model to deliver on the SPCB's goals for its futures thinking and foresight. This may include continuing with the current think tank model, developing it more broadly and considering alternative models such as in-house, externally and as a formal part of parliamentary scrutiny. The appraisal of options will be presented to the SPCB to select the preferred way forward and approve proceeding to phase 3.

iii. Structuring the chosen model (Oct-Dec 2025)

Once the preferred model is identified, the review will focus on the operational, governance, and funding structure that best supports it. This will include:

- a) Governance and Accountability - what governance model best supports the chosen structure, ensuring oversight and alignment with the SPCB's objectives?
- b) Finance - what funding model ensures sustainability, impact, flexibility and resilience in a changing environment?
- c) Team and Expertise - what skills and expertise will be required in the selected model to drive foresight, research, and collaboration effectively?
- d) Operational Framework - how should the model be structured operationally to ensure efficiency, agility, and relevance?
- e) Change management – what are the implications of moving to the preferred model; what will the impact be on the board, staff and the current workplan; what budget, timescale and staff and skills will be needed for the transition?

17. The SPCB will be invited to approve the outcomes of the review, presented at the end of phase 3 and commission its implementation for session 7.

## **Governance**

18. To ensure effective oversight and decision-making a governance structure is proposed that recognises the SPCB as the ultimate strategic decision maker (as can be seen from the decision points identified in the proposal above) but leverages the expertise and support of the board of directors.
19. The review would be led by Susan Mansfield, Head of Business at Scotland's Futures Forum, with a Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) appointed from parliamentary staff. The SRO would chair an advisory board to provide expert advice, which offers a way to engage board members.

## **Resource implications**

20. The review can be undertaken through the flexible use of the Forum's existing resources. The review will also look to collaborate and consult with relevant offices in the Parliament, at appropriate points throughout and will look to utilise existing methods of engagement where possible.

## **Publication Scheme**

21. This paper can be published, but only after discussions have taken place with the Board of the Futures Forum.

## **Decision**

22. The SPCB is invited to consider and agree:
  - Whether to commission a review of Scotland's Futures Forum
  - The proposed scope, approach, timeframe and governance of the review.

**Chief Executive Office/Scotland's Futures Forum**  
December 2024