

The Scottish Parliament Debating Chamber

• What business takes place in the Chamber?



This online document describes what happens in the Debating Chamber (also referred to as the Chamber) of the Scottish Parliament. It also provides some information about the Chamber's design.

The Chamber is the focal point for the Scottish Parliament's business. It is where Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) meet to debate topical issues and decide on new laws. It is also where MSPs question the First Minister and the other Scottish Ministers on a regular basis, and where Ministers deliver statements on policy developments and key events.

How is parliamentary business in the Chamber organised?

A parliamentary year normally runs from May to May. When Parliament is sitting, meetings of the full Parliament normally take place in the Chamber on Wednesday afternoons, Thursday mornings and Thursday afternoons.

How can I find out when the Parliament is sitting?

The Scottish Parliament sits for around 35 weeks a year. The dates of the periods when it is not sitting (recess) are published on our website.

Deciding the Parliament's business

The Parliamentary Bureau draws up a proposed agenda or business programme for meetings of the Parliament, which usually covers a two-week period. A business programme has to be agreed at a meeting of the Parliament, as do any changes to it. Once it has been agreed, the business programme is published in Section B of the Business Bulletin.

What is the Business Bulletin?

The Business Bulletin is a document containing details of current and future parliamentary business and of the progress of legislation. It is produced each weekday when Parliament is sitting and periodically during recess.

The Parliamentary Bureau consists of the Presiding Officer (who chairs meetings) and MSPs nominated by each of the political parties and groups with five or more members in the Parliament.

Allocating time in the Chamber

The Parliamentary Bureau is responsible for allocating time in the Chamber. The Scottish Executive (the Government party or parties) gets most of the debating time, but the Parliamentary Bureau has to ensure that:

- on 16 half sitting days in each parliamentary year priority is given to business chosen by the non-Executive parties and groups, and
- on 12 half sitting days in each parliamentary year priority is given to business chosen by the Parliament's committees.

Debating time is allocated to the non-Executive parties and groups broadly in proportion to the number of seats they hold in the Parliament.

What is a half sitting day?

Parliamentary business days are divided into morning and afternoon sessions, each of which makes up a half sitting day.

In addition, the Parliamentary Bureau has to make sure that enough time is set aside for the First Minister to make statements to a meeting of the Parliament. For example, the First Minister periodically makes a statement on the Executive's legislative programme, setting out the bills that it plans to introduce. The Parliamentary Bureau also ensures that time is provided, as required, for other ministerial statements, for discussions in relation to the budget process and for oral questions.

Choosing speakers and allocating time in debates

The Presiding Officer decides who will speak in a debate and the amount of time that will be allocated to each speaker.

- When choosing speakers, the Presiding Officer tries to achieve a balance between the different parties and viewpoints.
- When allocating time, the Presiding Officer takes into account the length of the debate and the number of MSPs who have indicated an interest in speaking. MSPs can indicate their interest in advance by contacting their representative on the Parliamentary Bureau or the clerks in the Parliamentary Business Team. They can also indicate their interest during the debate by pressing the 'request to speak' button on the consoles on their desks.

The opening and closing speeches are generally made by Ministers and the parties' or groups' lead speakers on the issue being discussed. The time between these is for open debate, during which other MSPs can speak.

Depending on the length of the debate, the opening and closing speakers may each be given between five and 20 minutes; other speakers may each be allocated between four and six minutes. The Presiding Officer may reduce these times if a lot of MSPs wish to contribute to the debate.

The microphone on an MSP's desk is activated only when the Presiding Officer calls that MSP to speak.

Who is involved in a meeting of the Parliament?

MSPs

The Scottish Parliament is made up of 129 MSPs, and there are 131 desks and seats on the floor of the Chamber for the MSPs and Law Officers. The choice of a semi-circular layout reflects the desire to encourage consensus among MSPs. This layout contrasts with the seating arrangements of the Westminster Parliament, where Government and Opposition parties face each other directly.

MSPs are free to sit wherever they wish in the Chamber, but they typically sit in their party groups. There are currently eight parties represented in the Scottish Parliament, as well as some MSPs who do not belong to any political party. (The names of the parties and typical seating arrangements are shown in the top photograph on page 3.) The First Minister, the other Scottish Ministers and the Law Officers generally sit in the front rows of the middle section.

Who are the Law Officers?

The Law Officers (the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor General for Scotland) advise the Scottish Executive on legal matters and do not have to be MSPs. If they are not MSPs, they can still take part in certain parliamentary proceedings and so require seats in the Chamber.



The Presiding Officer

At its first meeting after a general election, the Parliament elects one MSP to serve as Presiding Officer and two MSPs to serve as Deputy Presiding Officers.

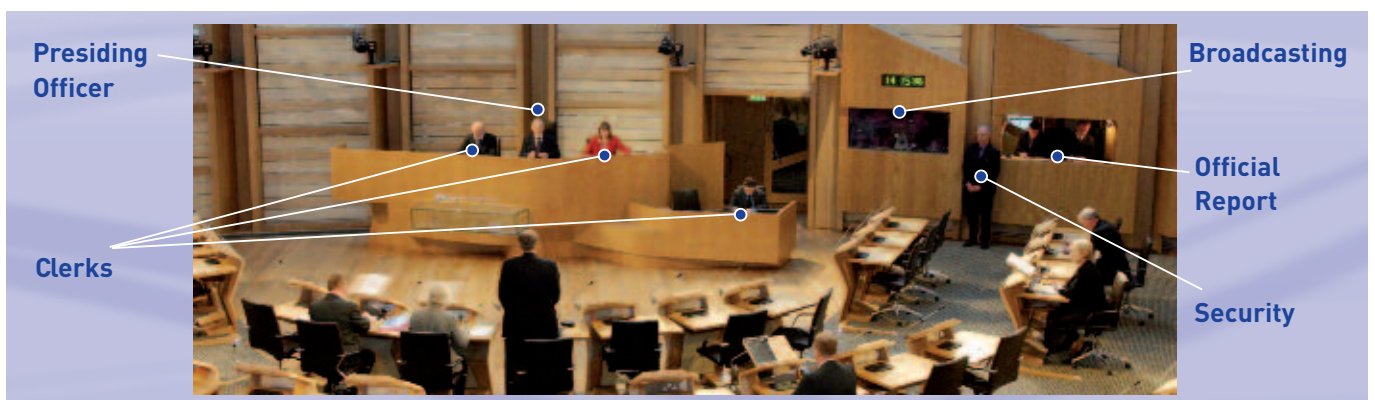
Within the Chamber, the role of the Presiding Officer (or of a Deputy acting in this capacity) is to chair meetings of the Parliament and decide on any questions that arise over parliamentary procedure and the application of the Standing Orders. When chairing meetings, the Presiding Officer or a Deputy Presiding Officer must act impartially.

Clerks

The clerks are parliamentary officials. The principal clerk and the minute clerk, who sit beside the Presiding Officer, provide advice on arrangements for debates and on how to interpret and apply the Standing Orders. The vote clerk, who sits at the desk in front of the Presiding Officer, operates the electronic voting equipment and the Chamber clocks.

What are the Standing Orders?

The Standing Orders contain the rules governing how the Parliament conducts its business.



Official Report

The Official Report is the written record of what is said at each meeting of the Parliament. Reporters work on a rota, each taking a five or ten-minute 'turn' in a booth to the Presiding Officer's left. Although a digital audio recording is made, reporters watch proceedings closely and note, for example, the time when each MSP begins speaking, any gestures or tones of voice that add to meaning, and any comments that might not have been caught by the microphones. Back in their office, reporters use the recording and their notes to produce the written record. The Official Report of a meeting is available in paper copy and on our website by 08.00 the following morning.

Broadcasting

The Parliament's Broadcasting Office is responsible for recording and televising all business in the Chamber and maintaining the two interpretation booths. The cameras are operated remotely. The sound operator, who works the microphones, sits in a booth to the Presiding Officer's left.

Languages in the Parliament

- The Parliament normally conducts its business in English, but MSPs can speak in any other language with the agreement of the Presiding Officer. For example, speeches have been made in Gaelic on a number of occasions.
- MSPs who wish to speak in a language other than English must give at least 24 hours' notice to allow arrangements for interpreters to be put in place.
- During the meeting, MSPs can follow speeches made in languages other than English through headsets connected to the consoles on their desks.

Security

Security staff ensure that order is maintained in the galleries and manage any evacuation from the Chamber. They also provide a messenger service during business. For example, they carry notes from the Official Report to MSPs, checking references made during speeches.

Officials

There are desks and seats at the back of the Chamber for use by up to 24 officials, whose role is to provide information and advice to MSPs and Ministers during meetings. These officials may be staff of the Parliament, of the Executive or of the different political parties. The number and composition vary depending on the business in progress.

What happens at a meeting of the Parliament?

The agenda for the day's meeting is published in Section A of the Business Bulletin, copies of which are available for visitors in the Parliament's Main Hall.

At the start of the meeting, a clerk bangs the gavel to announce the arrival of the Presiding Officer and all the MSPs stand while the Presiding Officer takes the chair.

The meeting of the Parliament that follows will include at least some of the following elements.

Time for Reflection

This is when an invited speaker addresses the Parliament for up to four minutes. It is normally held in the Chamber as the first item of business each week, usually on Wednesday afternoons.

Invitations to speak are issued by the Presiding Officer on advice from the Parliamentary Bureau. Over the course of a year, the Parliament aims to ensure that those invited are representative of the different religious beliefs of the people of Scotland (based on the Census) and also include individuals who do not represent any particular faith.

Debate

This is a discussion between MSPs, which can be on any issue. Debates are normally based on a motion, which is a proposal that the Parliament should do something or express an opinion about an issue. MSPs can lodge amendments (changes) to a motion and the Presiding Officer chooses which amendments will be debated. Sometimes, however, debates take place on a subject (for example, health) without there being a motion. In these cases, there are no amendments and no vote is taken at the end of the day.

During a debate, the person who is speaking may be asked by other MSPs if he or she will 'give way' or 'take an intervention', allowing them to ask a question or make an observation. All interventions should be brief, and it is up to the MSP who is speaking to decide whether or not to accept them. (For information about Members' Business debates, see page 6.)

Ministerial Statement

Ministerial statements are used to tell Parliament about urgent or topical issues. For example, statements have been made on business rates, smoking and plans for dealing with influenza. Normally, a Minister or Deputy Minister delivers a statement for 10-15 minutes and then answers questions on it from MSPs for around 20 minutes.

Question Time

Different types of Question Time take place in the Scottish Parliament.

First Minister's Question Time: This is the period of up to 30 minutes each week (normally starting at noon on Thursdays) when MSPs ask questions of the First Minister in the Chamber. Six questions are selected by the Presiding Officer, and these are published in Section D of the Business Bulletin, normally on the Tuesday before they will be asked in the Chamber.

General Question Time and Themed Question Time: This is the time in the Chamber each week (normally on Thursdays) when MSPs ask questions of the Scottish Ministers. There is one 20-minute period for general questions and another 40-minute period for questions on two specified themes such as education and justice. (The themes vary each week.) MSPs who wish to lodge a themed or general question submit their names for selection. Names are chosen at random by computer. Successful members then submit their questions, which are published in Section D of the Business Bulletin, normally one week before they will be asked in the Chamber.

SPCB Question Time: This is a period of up to 15 minutes at a meeting of the Parliament when MSPs put questions to the four MSPs who are members of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB). The questions are on the provision of staff, services and facilities at Holyrood, for which the SPCB is responsible. Questions are

selected at random by computer. These sessions take place occasionally.

All questions selected for a Question Time that are not answered in the Chamber receive a written answer, which is published in the Written Answers Report.

Legislation

The Scottish Parliament is able to make laws on devolved matters such as education, health and housing. (More information about devolved matters is available from the Public Information Service. Contact details are on page 8.)

The legislative process for bills (draft laws) normally consists of three parliamentary stages, at least two of which involve meetings of the Parliament in the Chamber. These stages are outlined below.

Stage 1: The general principles of the bill are considered by a committee (or committees) and then debated at a meeting of the Parliament.

The bill can proceed to Stage 2 only if the Parliament agrees to its general principles. If these are not agreed, the bill falls. If the Parliament decides that further consideration is needed and refers the bill back to a committee, another Stage 1 debate will have to be arranged for a later date.

Stage 2: The bill is considered in detail and amendments can be made.

This stage is normally carried out in committee meetings, but some bills may – and emergency bills must – be considered in the Chamber by a Committee of the Whole Parliament. In these cases, the Presiding Officer acts as the convener of the Committee.

Stage 3: This is the final parliamentary stage. It is in two parts, both of which take place in the Chamber:

- Consideration of amendments to the bill – or of further amendments if it was already changed at Stage 2. Any Stage 3 amendments to bills are debated and decided on during this part of the proceedings.
- A debate on the merits of the bill as a whole and a decision (taken at Decision Time) on whether the bill in its final form should be passed.

Business Motions and Parliamentary Bureau Motions

These are motions in the name of the Parliamentary Bureau concerning arrangements for dealing with parliamentary business.

The agenda for meetings of the Parliament and the timetable for stages of bills are put forward as business motions. Parliamentary Bureau motions are used to propose a range of matters including:

- the establishment, remit and membership of committees and sub-committees
- the designation of a committee to take the lead in considering a bill or a piece of subordinate legislation
- the action to be taken with regard to a piece of subordinate legislation
- the dates of recess periods.

Decision Time

This is the time when MSPs decide on the motions that have been discussed that day. It normally takes place at 17.00, and MSPs who are not in the Chamber are alerted by the division bell, which is sounded throughout the Parliament building except for the Chamber.

At Decision Time, the Presiding Officer goes through the list of motions and amendments that have been considered that day and, for each one, asks MSPs if they all agree with what is being proposed. If any MSP answers 'No', the Presiding Officer announces that there will be a division (a vote). MSPs can vote 'Yes', 'No' or 'Abstain' by pressing the appropriate voting button on the electronic consoles on their desks. After the 30-second voting period has ended, the computer system calculates the result, which is noted by the clerks and announced by the Presiding Officer. The system is then reset for the next vote. Details of how MSPs voted are published in the Official Report of the meeting.

A motion that has been agreed by the Parliament is called a resolution.

Voting on motions

- If there are amendments to a motion, MSPs take a decision on these before deciding on the motion itself.
- If an amendment is accepted, MSPs then take a decision on the 'motion as amended', which will reflect the agreed change. This means that the terms of the motion finally voted on by the Parliament may be very different from the original motion lodged for debate.

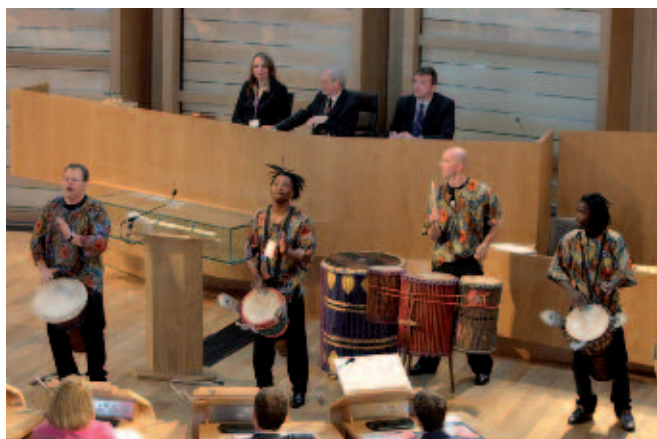
Members' Business

Members' Business is a debate on a motion proposed by an MSP who is not a Scottish Minister. The topic discussed generally relates to a particular region, marks a specific event or highlights an issue of interest to the MSP that might not otherwise receive attention.

Members' Business normally takes place after Decision Time on Wednesdays and Thursdays and lasts up to 45 minutes. It concludes without any vote being taken.

Events

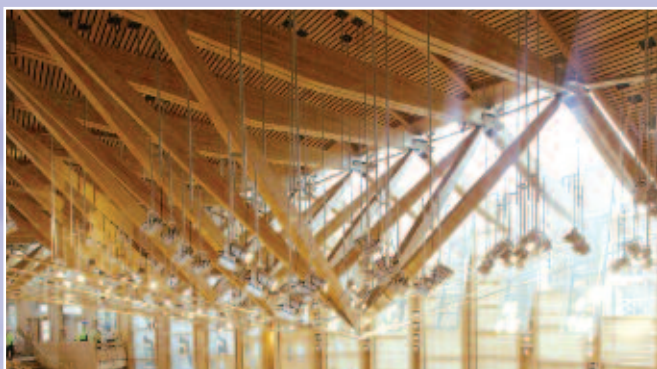
In addition to meetings of the Parliament, the Chamber is used for a range of events. These have included the presentation of the Carnegie Medals of Philanthropy, the Festival of Politics, committee events on business, health and planning, and the Scotland-Malawi Partnership Conference.



Design and fittings of the Debating Chamber

The Debating Chamber was the centre of the architect Enric Miralles's vision for the new Scottish Parliament. It was designed to reflect the Parliament's commitment to openness, and it is purpose-built to meet the needs of the Parliament, the public and the media.

Roof: The roof structure is made from laminated oak beams reinforced with a steel core and held in place by 112 unique stainless steel nodes or connecting joints. This enables it to span 30 metres without any supporting columns.



Desks: The desks are made of oak and sycamore. They were designed by Enric Miralles and made by Ben Dawson of East Lothian. Each desk is fitted with a built-in lectern, voting console, microphone and speakers. There is also a shelf and a small drawer for stationery. There is no specific symbolism associated with their shape.

Consoles: Each MSP has a unique access card with a microchip. When this card is inserted into a console, it identifies the MSP and allows him or her to take part in proceedings. The electronic consoles are used by MSPs for voting and during debates when they wish to speak.



Clocks: There are six clocks in the Chamber, including two pairs. During debates, one clock in each pair shows the actual time and the other shows how long the current speaker has been talking.

Cameras: There are eight robotic cameras, which are capable of recording what takes place in all areas of the Chamber. All meetings in the Chamber are broadcast live over the internet and on monitors throughout the Parliament campus.

Mace: The Mace was designed and crafted by Michael Lloyd and presented by HM The Queen at the opening of the Scottish Parliament on 1 July 1999. It is made from silver with an inlaid band of gold panned from Scottish rivers. The inlaid gold band symbolises the marriage between the Parliament, the people and the land. Engraved on the head of the Mace are the opening line of the Scotland Act 1998 – 'There shall be a Scottish Parliament' – and the words 'Wisdom', 'Justice', 'Compassion' and 'Integrity', which represent the aspirations of the people for their MSPs. The Mace is normally displayed in a glass case. It is uncovered before the start of each meeting of the Parliament.



Cut-out shapes: The cut-out shapes featured on panels around the Chamber were intended by the architect to represent people, reminding MSPs of the wider audience watching them at work.

Carpet: The triangular-patterned carpet on the floor of the Chamber was designed by Enric Miralles and manufactured by ege, a Danish company. The pattern was printed on to the carpet and follows the curve of the Chamber.

Floor: The space in front of the Presiding Officer's desk is made from Scottish oak.

Galleries: The public gallery can accommodate 225 members of the public. There are also galleries for 18 invited guests and 34 members of the media. The galleries include dedicated places for wheelchair users and have induction loop and infra-red sound enhancement systems. The seats in the galleries are based on the design of a chair by Enric Miralles and were manufactured by Sellex of Madrid.

Further information

- You can find the Standing Orders, the Business Bulletin, the Official Reports of meetings of the Parliament and the Written Answers Report in the Parliamentary Business section of our website: www.scottish.parliament.uk/business/index.htm.
- You can follow all meetings in the Chamber live on the internet by using our webcast service: www.holyrood.tv. You can watch previous business in the Film Archive section of this website, where parliamentary proceedings are archived for one calendar month.
- The programme Holyrood Live normally provides some live television coverage of proceedings in the Chamber. Some coverage of parliamentary business is also provided by programmes on other channels. Details can be found in TV listings.
- If you wish to attend a meeting of the Parliament, you can book tickets through Visitor Services by calling 0131 348 5200 or emailing sp.bookings@scottish.parliament.uk.

The Scottish Parliament Public Information Service

The Scottish Parliament Public Information Service provides information about the Scottish Parliament, its membership, business and procedures. Contact details are given below:

	Address	Public Information Service The Scottish Parliament Edinburgh EH99 1SP
	Telephone	0131 348 5000 0845 278 1999 (local rate)
		Textphone users can contact us on 0845 270 0152 . We also welcome calls using the RNID Typetalk service.
	Fax	0131 348 5601
	Email	sp.info@scottish.parliament.uk
	Website	www.scottish.parliament.uk

This leaflet is part of the series *How the Scottish Parliament Works*. Please contact the Public Information Service if you would like this leaflet in another format or language.

Other titles in this series:

- **How the Scottish Parliament Works** is an introductory guide to the Scottish Parliament, its membership, business and procedures.
- **MSPs and their Work** describes how MSPs are elected, what they do and how to contact them.
- **The Official Report** is a guide to the written record of what is said in public meetings of the Parliament and its committees.
- **Representing the People of Scotland** outlines the roles and responsibilities of the different organisations that represent the people of Scotland and offers guidance on whom to contact if you have an issue you wish to raise.
- **The Work of Committees in the Scottish Parliament** explains what committees do and how they operate.

Photo credits:

Adam Elder and Andrew Cowan © Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body.