What happens in the Debating Chamber?

This document describes what happens in the Debating Chamber of the Scottish Parliament.

What happens in the Scottish Parliament Chamber?

The Chamber is where meetings of the full Parliament take place. During these meetings Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) debate topical issues and decide on new laws. The Chamber is also used for a range of events involving invited guests and members of the public.

When do meetings of the full Parliament take place?

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. When Parliament is sitting, meetings normally take place in the Chamber on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays.

**How is parliamentary business decided?**

The Parliamentary Bureau draws up a proposed agenda or business programme for meetings of the Parliament, which usually covers a two-week period. The proposed business programme has to be agreed at a meeting of the Parliament, as do any changes to it.

**How is time allocated in debates?**

The Presiding Officer decides who will speak in a debate in the Chamber. The time allocated to speakers depends on the length of the debate and the number of MSPs who want to contribute.
What is the Parliamentary Bureau?

The Parliamentary Bureau consists of the Presiding Officer (who chairs meetings) and one representative from each of the political parties or groupings with five or more MSPs.
Who is involved in a meeting of the Parliament?

A meeting is usually attended by:

**MSPs**
The Scottish Parliament is made up of 129 MSPs, who usually sit in their party groups. There are currently five parties represented in the Scottish Parliament, as well as an independent MSP. The five parties are: the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, the Scottish Green Party, the Scottish Labour Party, the Scottish Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party. The First Minister, the Cabinet Secretaries and Ministers, and the Law Officers generally sit in the front rows of the middle section.

**The Presiding Officer**
At its first meeting after the general election, the Parliament elected one MSP to serve as Presiding Officer.
and two MSPs to serve as Deputy Presiding Officers. One of their key roles is to chair meetings in the Chamber and decide on questions arising over the application of the standing orders. When chairing meetings, the Presiding Officers must act impartially.

**Clerks**

The clerks are parliamentary officials, who provide advice on arrangements for debates and on how to interpret the standing orders (the rules governing how the Parliament conducts its business.) They also operate the voting equipment and Chamber clocks.

**Official Report**

The Official Report is the written record of what is said at each meeting of the Parliament and of any votes taken. It is prepared by the official reporters who attend meetings on a rota basis, using their notes and a digital audio
recording of proceedings. It is normally available on our website around 21.00 on the day of the meeting.

**Broadcasting**

Broadcasting staff are responsible for televising and recording all business in the Chamber. They also operate the microphones and maintain the interpreting and commentary booths.

**Officials**

There are desks and seats at the back of the Chamber for use by officials who provide information and advice to MSPs and to Cabinet Secretaries and Ministers during meetings. Officials may be staff of the Parliament, the Scottish Government or the different political parties.
Security

Security staff ensure order is maintained in the galleries and manage any evacuation from the Chamber. They also provide a messenger service to MSPs during business.
What happens at a meeting of the Parliament?

Chamber business can include:

**Time for Reflection**
This is when an invited speaker addresses the Parliament for up to four minutes, sharing their thoughts on an issue. It is normally the first item of business in the Chamber each week.

**Debates**
These are discussions between MSPs, which can be on any issue. Debates are normally based on a motion (a proposal that the Parliament should do something or express an opinion about an issue) and may include discussion of proposed amendments (changes) to the motion.
**Legislation**

The legislative process for bills normally consists of three parliamentary stages, at least two of which involve meetings of the Parliament in the Chamber. The Parliament has to decide on the general principles of a bill at the end of stage 1. If these are agreed, the bill will be considered at stage 2 by a committee (occasionally, by a Committee of the Whole Parliament in the Chamber), where it can be amended. It will be considered again at a meeting in the Chamber at stage 3, when it may be amended. Stage 3 will also include a debate on the bill in its final form and a decision on whether or not to pass it.

**Ministerial statement**

Ministerial statements are used by the Scottish Government to tell the Parliament about urgent or topical issues. After the statement, MSPs have an opportunity to question the relevant Minister.
Question Time

Different types of Question Time take place.

Topical Question Time (normally on Tuesdays) allows MSPs to ask questions about issues that have emerged since the Parliament last met.

First Minister’s Question Time is the period of up to 30 minutes each week (normally starting at noon on a Thursday) when MSPs ask questions of the First Minister in the Chamber. General Question Time and Portfolio Question Time are the periods when MSPs ask questions of the other Cabinet Secretaries and Ministers in the Chamber each week.

Decision Time

This is the time when MSPs decide on the motions and amendments that have been discussed that day in the Chamber, often by voting. It normally takes place at 17.00.
Members’ business

This is a debate on a motion proposed by an MSP who is not a Cabinet Secretary or 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. It lasts up to 45 minutes and no vote is taken on the motion.
How can I follow what happens in the Chamber?

The Business Bulletin contains details of current and future parliamentary business and of the progress of legislation. It is produced each weekday when the Parliament is sitting.

You can find the Business Bulletin and Official Reports in the Parliamentary Business section of our website: 
www.scottish.parliament.uk

You can follow all meetings in the Chamber live on the internet using the webcast service on our website.

You can book tickets to attend meetings of the Parliament by calling 0131 348 5200 or emailing sp.bookings@scottish.parliament.uk
Events

In addition to meetings of the Parliament, the Chamber is used for a wide range of events.

Numerous events with high-profile guests take place in the Chamber during the annual Festival of Politics. It is also the venue for sessions involving a variety of participants from across Scotland and beyond. For example, the Business in the Parliament conferences bring together MSPs, business organisations, trade unions and the public. Other events in the Chamber have included an international conference on human rights and debating tournaments for secondary schools.
Design and features of the Chamber

The Chamber was the centre of the architect Enric Miralles’ 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.

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. 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 and is uncovered before the start of each meeting of the Parliament.
**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 and a touchscreen microphone and voting unit.

**Clocks**

During debates, one clock in each pair shows the actual time and the other shows how long the current speaker has been talking.

**Consoles**

The electronic consoles on the desks are used by MSPs for voting and during debates when they wish to speak.

**The 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.
Galleries
The public gallery can accommodate 225 members of the public. There are also galleries for invited guests and members of the media.

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.
For more information on the Scottish Parliament, its membership, business and procedures, **please contact us.**

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2nd edition, July 2012 (revised July 2013)