I wish to make a few observations and suggestions regarding your current inquiry, in particular regarding the amending stages of bills (question 5).

Currently there are occasions when there is insufficient time for the consideration of amendments at Stage 2 and in particular at Stage 3.

When substantial amendments are submitted at Stage 2 (for example the current Criminal Justice Bill, where amendments on the ending of automatic early release for some serious offenders and the Bonomy review group deliberations on corroboration and safeguards will be introduced at Stage 2) Committees must be afforded sufficient time to take supplementary evidence. There must be flexibility to extend the timescale for the consideration of Bills to enable appropriate scrutiny to take place.

The deadlines by which amendments must be submitted should be brought forward, to allow a longer period between when amendments must be submitted and the Stage 2 and Stage 3 consideration. This would allow better planning for the timing of these stages both in Committee and in the Chamber.

Stage 3 consideration of Bills should not be crammed into one day’s sitting where a Bill is controversial and may have a large number of amendments. Debate on Stage 3 of Bills has worsened since the advent of 3 days sitting, as there is no longer the option of devoting the morning and afternoon Thursday sessions to Stage 3 consideration. We have – and have always had – a number of bland and unnecessary debates in the Scottish Parliament which do little to inspire us or the Scottish public. Some of these could be dispensed with in order to allocate sufficient time for serious debate on the details of our legislation at Stage 3. I am sure the public would rather parliamentarians spent time scrutinising the laws we are passing rather than debating self-congratulatory motions about how well the Government is doing (this is not a criticism of the current government alone, it has happened for the 15 years of the parliament) or bland discussions on things we all agree on. Therefore I would suggest that Stage 3 of major pieces of legislation could be spread over the entire week when the number of substantial amendments merits it. I appreciate that this means we all have to be in or around the chamber to vote, but it is our job, and I doubt it will happen for anything other than major and controversial legislation.

I am not in favour of routinely extending decision time in order to accommodate debate on amendments, and in particular would oppose any suggestion that there should be no time limit for Stage 3 proceedings. This parliament was set up to be family friendly, as far as possible, and although my family are adult, I stay in Edinburgh during the week and later sittings are no problem for me, I do understand how difficult it can be for parents of young families or others with caring responsibilities when decision time is changed at very short notice. If we want to
attract talented young women and men to serve in the Scottish Parliament we must preserve our commitment to being family friendly. This is not an excuse for a 5pm finish, we all work long after decision time is over whether that is in this building, at home on our laptops/ipads or in our communities.

I hope this is helpful

ELAINE MURRAY MSP
12 MARCH 2013