



The Scottish
Parliament

The Official Report

• How can I find out what is said in the Scottish Parliament?



The Official Report

The Official Report is the written record of everything that is said in public meetings of the Scottish Parliament and its committees.

What is the Official Report?

It could be said that the Official Report records what Charles Dickens, a parliamentary reporter himself, described as “the music of the parliamentary bagpipes”. It is the written record of everything that is said in public meetings of the Scottish Parliament and its committees. It includes debates, statements, questions, votes and evidence given to committees. The written answers report, in which questions from MSPs are answered by the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, is also part of the Official Report.

Most speeches in the Scottish Parliament are in English, so most of the Official Report is in English. Speeches in Gaelic are reported in Gaelic and appear together with the English interpretation. When people have given evidence in other languages, including French, German, Catalan, Czech, Punjabi and British Sign Language, the English interpretation has been reported. Passages have also appeared in Scots, Italian, Dutch, Basque, Russian and Latin.

Why have an Official Report?

- The Official Report supports the Parliament’s founding principles by enabling everyone to read what has been said in Parliament and by helping MSPs to hold the Scottish Executive to account.
- When scrutinising bills or carrying out inquiries, committees need to be able to review what was said by ministers or by other people who were invited to give evidence.
- Under the Pepper v Hart legal ruling of 1993, disputes over the meaning of legislation can be resolved by reading what ministers said about their intentions.
- Over the years, editions of the Official Report will build into a valuable historical archive, covering the vast range of topics that MSPs have discussed, and recounting the changing moods of our national life. The archive will be available to everyone.

Who produces the Official Report?

The Official Report team, led by the editor and the deputy editor, is made up of reporters, sub-editors and editorial support staff. They are all employees of the Parliament.

The most visible members of the team are the reporters. In the chamber, they are in one of the booths on the Presiding Officer's left; in the committee rooms, they are at the table between the MSPs and the clerks.



How is the Official Report produced?

Reporting the Parliament

The report of a meeting of the Parliament has to be produced quickly to be ready for publication overnight. To speed up the process, reporters work on a rota, each taking a five or 10-minute "turn". This explains why the occupants of the booth keep changing, with one disappearing and a new one arriving.

While in the booth, reporters follow the debate closely. They watch for glances or gestures that show that a speaker is referring to a particular person or party; they listen for off-microphone comments; and they send notes to MSPs to verify their intentions, to confirm the sources of quotations, and to ensure that any names mentioned are spelled correctly.

The reporters then get back to their desks where they type and edit their turns. They have to finish quickly before their next slot on the rota comes round.

Reporting committees

The reports of meetings of committees are not usually written while the meetings are still going on. Several different meetings might be held at the same time, so reporters cannot often work on a rota. Instead, one or two reporters take a detailed log of what is said. Five-minute segments of this log will be used later by other reporters when they are writing the report. Those reporters will not have heard the whole meeting, so the log must identify all speakers, clarify any technical jargon and explain all references. To give the simplest example, every time a speaker says "you", the log has to identify who "you" is.

Technology

Although shorthand has traditionally been an essential skill for parliamentary reporters, the Official Report uses a digital audio recording and playback system that allows reporters to sit at a computer and listen to any part of any debate – perhaps only moments after it has taken place – while typing and editing their work.

Putting the report together

The sub-editors collect the reporters' turns and form half-hour sections of text. They read every word, checking for accuracy, consistency and continuity. They then fit the sections together to produce the complete report.

One and a half hours after sitting down at the end of a speech in the chamber, an MSP may check that he or she has been reported accurately. If the MSP has a query, it is the sub-editors who will respond and make the editorial decisions.

The editorial support team provides administrative support and works with colleagues throughout the Parliament, including clerks and researchers, to ensure that reporters and sub-editors have all the documents they need to report meetings accurately. After a member of the public has given evidence, the team sends them a paper copy of the Official Report and invites them to check that their evidence has been reported correctly.

Is the Official Report a word for word account?

Not quite. When we speak, we use gesture and tone of voice to add to the meaning of our words, but this is lost on paper. Even the finest orators among us make occasional slips of the tongue. We may hesitate or repeat ourselves. A shouted comment may interrupt us, and we may pick up again not quite where we left off. We may be halfway through a sentence but then start a new one if we suddenly have a new idea.

All that is perfectly natural in speech but, if written down precisely word for word, it may not accurately represent what was understood by

listeners at the time. Therefore, what is said will sometimes be lightly edited so that the words flow as smoothly and clearly to a reader as they did to a listener.

Like similar reports in many other Parliaments, the Official Report is “substantially verbatim”. Shortly after the first meeting of the Parliament in 1999, the Presiding Officer explained that in a substantially verbatim report “repetitions and redundancies should be omitted and obvious mistakes should be corrected while maintaining the flavour of the speech.”

What is the history of the Official Report?

The first Official Report of a meeting of the Scottish Parliament was published the morning after the first meeting of the Parliament on 12 May 1999. However, the Official Report can trace its roots back a couple of centuries – although not as far back as 1707 and the old Scottish Parliament. The proceedings of the old Parliament, including vigorous debates on the Darien venture and the impending union with the English Parliament, were minuted rather than reported. No official record exists of the Earl of Seafield’s famous description of the closing of the old Scottish Parliament as “ane end to ane auld sang”.

It was at Westminster in 1803, after centuries in which the House of Commons had been determined to keep its deliberations secret, that radical pamphleteer William Cobbett made the first structured attempt to record parliamentary debates. Pressure for better reporting had grown – both among the public, who felt they had a right to know, and among politicians themselves, who felt that inaccurate and incomplete reports in newspapers did Parliament no favours.

A few years later, Cobbett sold his business to Thomas Curson Hansard, the son of the Government’s printer, Luke Hansard. The Hansard family retained their interest for the best part of a century and the printed publication of parliamentary debates took the name Hansard.

In the early years of the 20th century, a House of Commons select committee was set up to investigate ways of improving the quality of reporting. The committee was particularly impressed by the Canadian Official Report – which, like many Commonwealth Official Reports today, had followed Westminster in adopting the name Hansard. In 1909, as a result of the committee’s work, Hansard took its present form as a complete, impartial and substantially verbatim report produced by in-house staff.

On devolution in 1999, the new Scottish Parliament and the new Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies all established their own Official Reports. In 2001, the Official Reports of all the Parliaments and Assemblies in Britain and Ireland, including those of Jersey and the Isle of Man, established BIPRA – the British-Irish Parliamentary Reporting Association. BIPRA is committed to maintaining the highest standards of parliamentary reporting and to serving its legislators as well as possible.

Where can I read the Official Report?

You can read the Official Report on the Scottish Parliament's website at:

www.scottish.parliament.uk

You can also read the Official Report at one of 80 partner libraries around the country. To find out where your nearest partner library is, contact the Public Information Service (see right).

You can purchase printed copies of the Official Report at:

Address **Blackwell's Bookshop**
53 South Bridge
Edinburgh
EH1 1YS

Telephone **0131 622 8222**



When is the Official Report ready?

A report of a meeting of the Parliament is available in paper copy and on the Scottish Parliament's website by 8 o'clock the following morning. A report of a committee meeting is almost always available before the next meeting of that committee – often several days before. Later, an archive edition of reports is published.

How can I find out more?

For more information about the Official Report you can contact us at:

Email **official.report@scottish.parliament.uk**

For more general inquiries about the Scottish Parliament, you are welcome to contact our Public Information Service at:

Address **Public Information Service**
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Telephone **0131 348 5000**
0845 278 1999 (local rate)
Fòn **0131 348 5395** (Gàidhlig)

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**

What other documents are available?

The Official Report is one of a series of documents that are essential to the smooth running and openness of the Parliament.

- The Business Bulletin informs MSPs and the public about what is going to happen in the Parliament. It includes the business programme, agendas for committee meetings, written questions, motions and other matters to be notified to MSPs.
- The Minutes of Proceedings are the formal record of what happened at each meeting of the Parliament. They list all the items of business taken and the results of any decisions and votes.
- Research briefings and fact sheets are produced by the Scottish Parliament information centre.
- 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.