

Committees in Parliament

Most of the work of Parliament is done by committees. Committees are the places where members of the public can express their opinions directly and try to influence the outcome of Parliament's decisions. Their meetings are open to the public, although they may be closed if there is a very good reason to do so.

Parliament does its work in plenary sessions (where members of a house meet in one group), in joint sittings (where both houses meet as one group), and in committees (smaller groups of members). The plenary groups of the two houses form specialised committees and give them responsibility for certain tasks. Working in committees allows Parliament to:

- Increase the amount of work that can be done (it is more efficient for a large group to delegate its work to smaller groups than to try to do it all in a single group)
- Ensure that issues can be debated in more depth than can be done in plenary sessions (because more time is available to concentrate on details)
- Increase the participation of members of Parliament (MPs) in discussions (members of a group can participate more fully when the group is small)
- Enable MPs to develop expertise and in-depth knowledge of the committee's area of work
- Provide a forum for the public to present its views directly to MPs, something which is not possible in a plenary sitting of Parliament
- Provide a forum for Parliament to hear evidence and collect documents which are relevant to the work of the specific committee

Committees have to report to the plenary group that has appointed them, and the plenary group must ratify certain decisions they make. For example, once a committee has considered a bill, the bill must be debated and voted on in the house. Committees are, in general, proportionally representative of the parties in Parliament.

The work of committees

Different kinds of committees have one or more of the following functions:

- They monitor and oversee the work of national government departments and hold them accountable
- They oversee the accounts of national government departments and state institutions
- They take care of domestic parliamentary issues
- They examine specific areas of public life or matters of public interest
- They consider bills and amend them, and may initiate bills
- They consider private members' and provincial legislative proposals and special petitions
- They consider international treaties and agreements

Committees have the power to summon any person to appear before them, give evidence or produce documents, they may require any person or institution to report to them, and they may receive petitions, representations or submissions from the public. They play a crucial role in the lawmaking process.

Domestic committees

The National Assembly has a number of domestic committees normally consisting of senior members that deal with matters affecting the smooth running of Parliament. The Rules Committee and its subcommittees deal with House rules, the budget of the House, support for members, internal arrangements, and powers and privileges of members. There is also a Rules subcommittee dealing with delegated legislation (when a minister makes legislation by issuing regulations rather than going through the lawmaking process.). Other domestic committees are the programme committee that plans the work of the Assembly, the disciplinary committee, and the committee of chairpersons.

The National Council of Provinces (NCOP) has its own domestic committees. The Rules Committee and its subcommittees deal with the NCOP rules, the NCOP budget, parliamentary privileges, internal arrangements, international relations and delegated legislation. The programme committee plans the work of the NCOP and the committee of chairpersons make recommendations about the functioning of committees and other NCOP forums.

Portfolio and select committees

The National Assembly appoints from among its members a number of portfolio committees to shadow the work of the various national government departments. Each committee has between 17 and 19 full members, and a number of alternate members. Portfolio committees consider bills, deal with departmental budget votes, oversee the work of the department they are responsible for, and enquire and make recommendations about any aspect of the department, including its structure, functioning and policy. The work of committees is not restricted to government - they may investigate any matter of public interest that falls within their area of responsibility. For example, in 1999 the Portfolio Committee on Trade and Industry held an investigation into bank charges and interest rates. There is a portfolio committee for each of the national ministries and their associated government departments.

The National Council of Provinces (NCOP) appoints from its permanent members a number of select committees to shadow the work of the various national government departments and to deal with bills. Each committee has between 13 and 15 full members. Because the NCOP has only 54 permanent members compared to the National Assembly's 400, the select committees shadow the work of more than one national government department.

Public accounts

The National Assembly's Standing Committee on Public Accounts acts as Parliament's watchdog over the way taxpayers' money is spent by the

executive. Every year the Auditor-General tables reports on the accounts and financial management of the various government departments and state institutions. Heads of these bodies are regularly called to account by this committee. The committee can recommend that the National Assembly takes corrective actions if necessary.

Members' legislative proposals and petitions

The National Assembly's Standing Committee on Private Members' Legislative Proposals and Special Petitions considers draft bills submitted by individual National Assembly members and public petitions submitted through a member of the Assembly. If the committee agrees with the principle of the draft bill or petition, a bill will be prepared and dealt with by Parliament in the usual way. As its name suggests, the NCOP's Select Committee on Members' and Provincial Legislative Proposals considers draft bills from individual NCOP members and provincial legislatures.

Ad hoc (temporary committees)

Whenever there is a need for a specific task to be done, Parliament or one of its houses may appoint an ad hoc (temporary) committee to do the work. When the task is complete, the committee is dissolved. Examples of issues dealt with by ad hoc committees are investigations into specific laws (like the Open Democracy Bill) or specific issues like gender equality or alleged breaches of parliamentary privilege.

Joint Committees

The National Assembly and the NCOP together appoint a number of joint committees, for example the Constitutional Review Committee. The Joint Committee on Ethics and Members' Interests keeps a register of MPs' financial interests to help prevent corruption and conflicts of interest. The register includes what MPs own, gifts they have received and any other sources of income they may have.

Ad hoc joint committees are formed whenever necessary. When the National Assembly and the NCOP are unable to agree on a bill, the Mediation Committee tries to reach a compromise.

The Joint Standing Committee on Intelligence and the Joint Standing Committee on Defence are statutory committees. This means that they are established either by the Constitution or by an Act of Parliament, as well as in terms of the rules of Parliament.

Who's who on a Committee

Each committee has a Chairperson and a Committee Secretary. If you want to make contact with a committee, these are the people you should speak to.