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A GUIDE TO

Petitions debates  
in Westminster Hall

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2023

# Who's who?



## **Chair**

The Chair is a senior MP who chairs the debate. They can be from any party and act impartially when they are in the Chair.



## **Clerk**

The Clerk gives the Chair advice on parliamentary procedure.



## **Hansard**

Hansard are the people who write the transcript of the debate.



## **Government Minister**

The Minister is normally the person responsible for the policy a petition is about.



## **Civil Servants**

Government officials who are there to support the Minister.



## **Opposition spokesperson**



## **Third largest party spokesperson**



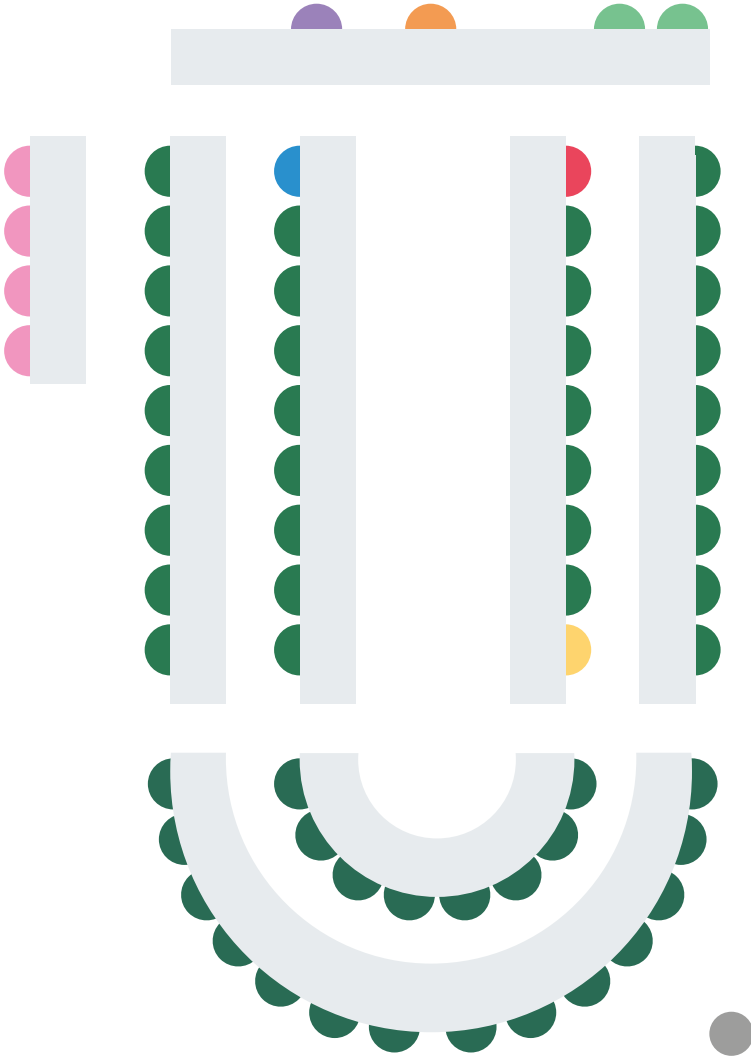
## **Backbench MPs**

MPs who are neither Government ministers nor spokespeople for the Opposition, including the MP opening the debate.



## **Doorkeeper**

The doorkeeper maintains the security of the chamber.



### **Public Gallery**

Members of the public watch the debate from here



# How the debate works

To mark the **start of the debate** the Chair says:

*“Order, order”*

The Chair then calls the MP who is opening the debate to **‘move the motion’**. Moving a motion means introducing something for debate. An MP does this by saying:

*“I beg to move that this House has considered e-petition [number and subject]”*

The MP will then normally **make a speech** about the petition and its request.

Sometimes MPs try to **intervene** during speeches. This means they’re asking the MP to let them interrupt. MPs do this by asking:

*“Will the Honourable Member give way?”*

If the MP accepts the intervention, the MP who has intervened can make a brief comment. The other MP then resumes their speech.

After the opening speech, the Chair says:

*“The Question is that this House has considered e-petition [number and subject].”*

Then other MPs are **called to speak**.

The Chair calls backbench MPs to speak in an order that they decide. The Chair might put a time limit on speeches if lots of MPs want to take part. If the debate is very popular there might not be enough time for every MP in the room to take part.

Towards the end of the debate, the Chair calls **MPs who represent the main opposition parties** to respond to the debate. An MP from the third largest party goes first, then an MP from the official Opposition.

The Chair then calls the **Government Minister** to respond to the debate on behalf of the Government.

If there is enough time, the MP who opened the debate can make final comments.

As long as everyone has finished speaking by the official finishing time of the debate, the Chair says:

*“The Question is that this House has considered e-petition [number and subject]. As many are of that opinion say aye, on the contrary no. The ayes have it, the ayes it”*

**No vote takes place on petitions debates**, even if some MPs say no. Debates on petitions are general debates on the subject of a petition, so MPs aren't deciding whether they agree with the petition being debated, they are simply

being invited to agree that the petition has been considered.

The **debate ends** when the Chair says:

*“Order, order”*

If there isn't another debate afterwards then the Chair will also say:

*“The sitting stands adjourned.”*

**Hansard** then writes up the transcript of the debate which will be published online at **[hansard.parliament.uk](https://hansard.parliament.uk)**. You can watch the debate back on **[YouTube.com/ukparliament](https://www.youtube.com/ukparliament)** and **[parliamentlive.tv](https://www.parliamentlive.tv)**.

# Common Questions

## **Why do MPs keep standing up?**

MPs “bob” up and down to indicate to the Chair that they want to speak in the debate. Sometimes MPs want to interrupt a speech to make a comment for the other MP to respond to. The MP doesn’t have to ‘give way’ (allow them to interrupt).

## **Do MPs have to stay the for the whole debate?**

If MPs want to speak in a debate, they are expected to be present for the opening speech and most of the debate.

## **Why are some MPs not making speeches?**

Some MPs come to debates just to listen to what’s being said or to make a short intervention rather than make a speech.

## **Why do MPs not call each other by their names?**

During debates, MPs refer to each other by the name of their constituencies or their official position. They mostly use the description “the Honourable Member for...”. This is a longstanding custom.