

How the UK Parliament Works

The UK is described as a 'parliamentary democracy'
- what is that?



Parliamentary democracy is when the day-to-day political bargaining between competing groups in society is done on their behalf by a small number of representatives - people who have either been elected or appointed to do this work.

The UK's parliamentary democracy has the following key features:

- **a permanent monarch** (Head of State) who is not involved in party politics
- **the government**, who chart the political direction of the country and who answer to Parliament
- **a Sovereign Parliament**, whose members are elected or appointed to represent the interests of the whole of the UK.

The UK Parliament is central to the democracy of the United Kingdom. It is

Isn't Parliament the same thing as the government?

No. In the UK, when we talk about 'the government', we usually mean just the UK Prime Minister, Cabinet ministers and junior ministers, and the civil servants who help them to run the country.

The UK government is formed by the political party that has won the largest number of MPs at a UK-wide general election. Its party leader becomes Prime Minister, and then appoints a team of ministers to take charge of running individual government departments and services.

through Parliament that the government of the UK is made accountable to its people.

The UK Parliament itself has three parts: the House of Commons, the House of Lords and the monarch. It is the authority of the Crown that gives Parliament its sovereign status. It means everyone – even the Prime Minister – is answerable to Parliament.

For more about the story of the UK's democracy and how it has developed over the centuries search:

 [evolution of parliament](#)

To find information about government departments search:

 [government departments](#)

Parliament is not responsible for running public services day-to-day: that is the responsibility of the UK government and the devolved administrations. But if the UK government wants to raise or spend public money or to change the law, it needs the permission of the UK Parliament.



What does the UK Parliament do?

Parliament is the UK's legislature, which means only Parliament can legislate (make laws) for the whole of the UK. When a new UK government comes to power and wants to carry out its agenda, it needs the approval of both Houses of Parliament before it can do this.

Crucially, Parliament ensures that the government of the day is accountable to the UK public for its decisions and actions. It does so in the following ways.

Scrutiny

Parliament questions the government on our behalf about its plans, to make sure they are properly thought through, and looks at them in detail before agreeing to them. Parliament also monitors the government's actions, to try to make sure that promises are kept, and public money isn't being wasted.

Accountability

Parliament carries out its work openly, in public. This allows everyone to see who is responsible for taking decisions, and their reasons for doing so. By holding decision-makers publicly accountable in this way, Parliament tries to ensure that governments and officials use their powers responsibly.

Representation

Parliament has members from every part of the UK as well as experts from most professions. This means that a wide range of perspectives and opinions is heard when an issue is debated there. It also means that every one of us is represented when decisions are made about our taxes or public spending. Members of Parliament can challenge the government on our behalf if its decisions have an unfair impact on people.

Who is in the UK Parliament?

Parliament is made up of people from many political parties, as well as those who are not party political. Some are the people we have elected and some are people who have been appointed. They work in two separate Houses:

- MPs work in the House of Commons, where every Member has been directly elected. General Elections take place at least every 5 years to allow people across the UK a choice in who represents their local area in the House of Commons.
- Members of the House of Lords have mostly been appointed for life, in recognition of their knowledge or experience. Lords are appointed by the monarch on the advice of the House of Lords Appointments Commission and the Prime Minister.

Find members of the Commons and Lords: members.parliament.uk

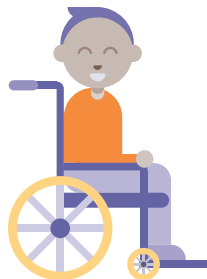
Government ministers are chosen from current members of the Commons or Lords, so they also have seats in Parliament. This means that a government spokesperson is present to answer questions and speak for the government on the record whenever concerns are being raised by members in either House.

See a list of current government ministers here: gov.uk/government/ministers

Ministers do most of their work in their government departments. When they are in Parliament, ministers speak for the government rather than expressing their own views or the views of their own constituents.

Petitioning Parliament

Anyone in the UK can petition Parliament about an issue they care about or that affects them. To find out more go to petition.parliament.uk/help



Government and Opposition

When a Prime Minister is appointed, a Leader of the Opposition is appointed too. Usually, this title falls to the leader of the next largest party in the Commons after a general election, which is known as the HM Official Opposition.

This official title underlines the principle that no government should be able to rule unopposed and that minority views should be heard - even if a government has won a landslide majority.

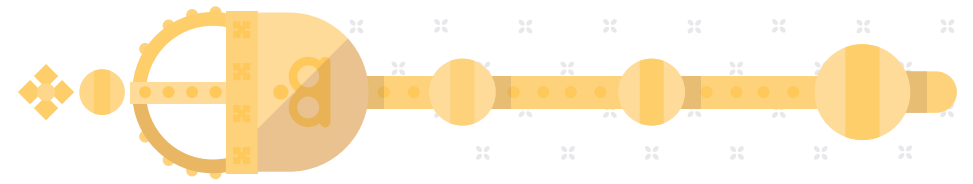
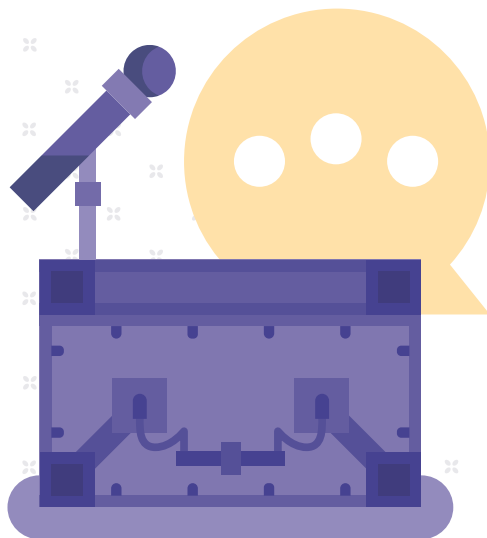
The Official Opposition party has a special status in Parliament: in the Commons, a portion of time is set aside for debates chosen by the Opposition, and the Speaker usually allows its spokespeople a greater share of opportunities to question government ministers in the Chamber.

The Leader of the Opposition appoints a team of spokespeople in both Houses, who shadow the roles of ministers in

the Cabinet and, together, represent an alternative government-in-waiting.

The layout of the Commons Chamber emphasises this: rows of benches run down either side, so that government and opposition party MPs sit facing each other. The ministerial and shadow ministerial teams occupy the front row on either side and are known as frontbenchers, in contrast to ordinary, or backbench, MPs.

In the House of Lords, rigid divisions along party lines are rare and a significant number of members do not belong to a political party. So while the government and official opposition parties do sit facing one another on the front and backbenches in the Lords Chamber, an extra set of benches runs from right to left across the Chamber - known as the crossbenches - for those without a party allegiance.



So how does the UK Parliament work, day to day?

A week in Parliament

Most activity at Westminster takes place between Monday afternoon and Thursday afternoon each week. This allows time for members of both Houses to travel to London and back, from their homes in every corner of the UK and so that MPs can spend time from Friday to Sunday working in their local constituencies.

Each House has a main Chamber where its members can meet in one place. The Chamber is the public stage where major political moments can play out: where ministers come to make important announcements, and where they are publicly challenged and held to account for their decisions by members of each House.

Each House also has a second, smaller debating chamber that is used on most days. This enables more business to be completed and more topics to be raised during the working week.

Away from the debating chambers, Parliament is a hive of activity throughout the day, with smaller groups of members working in committees and a host of private meetings taking place with campaigners, party officials or members of the public.

When either House meets on a Friday, the time is normally devoted to discussing non-government suggestions for changes in the law.

See Parliament's work for the week ahead: whatson.parliament.uk

Parliament's smaller chambers

In the Commons, Westminster Hall chamber is used for debating public petitions as well as hosting a packed schedule of short debates led by individual MPs on other days.

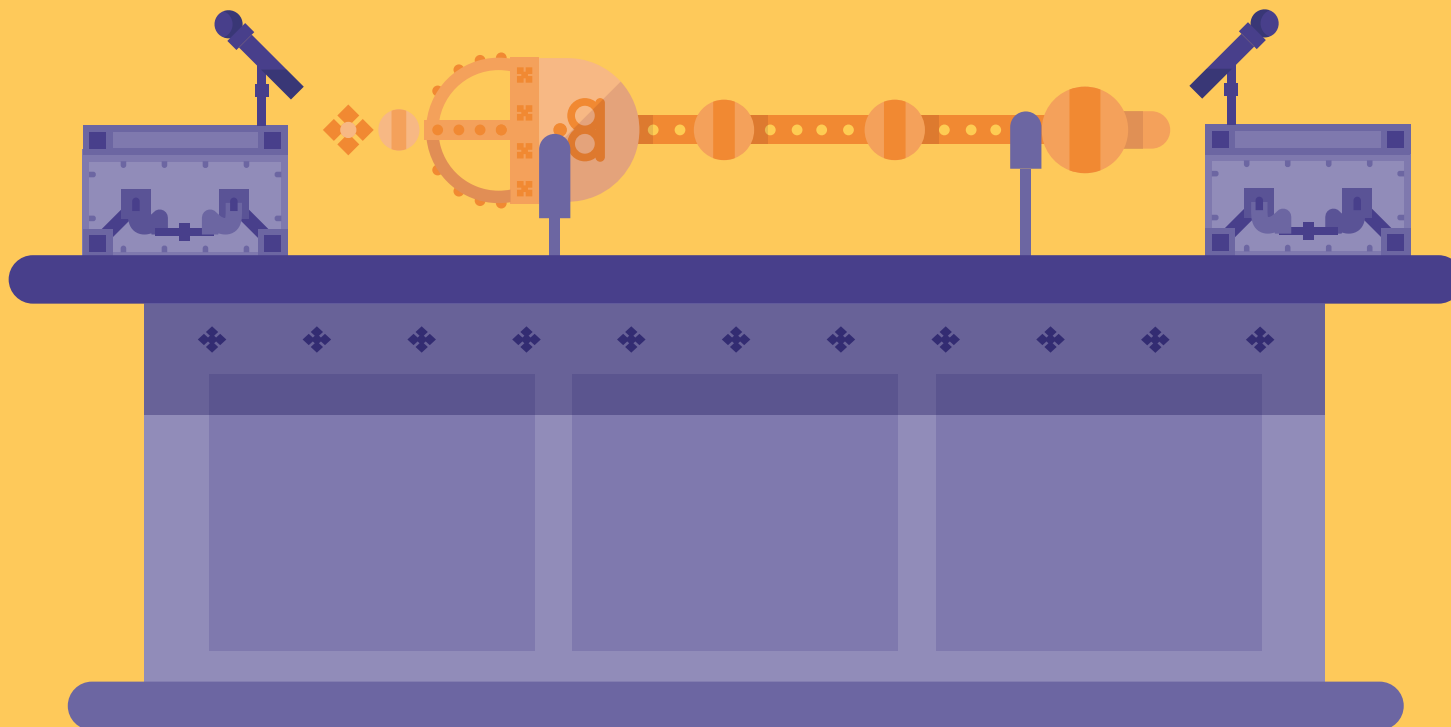
In the House of Lords, the Grand Committee room is often used to debate less controversial legislation, so that more can be dealt with each day.

What happens in the main Chambers?

Putting questions to ministers

A typical sitting day starts with MPs and members of the Lords putting their questions to ministers in each Chamber. These daily question times are a chance for them to ask about the government's plans and activities, or to press for more government action, and get an 'on the record' reply. It's also an opportunity for ministers to explain and defend their decisions.

On Wednesdays each week, the Prime Minister answers questions from MPs in the House of Commons Chamber – a lively event which is often reported widely in the media.





Government statements and Urgent Questions

After questions, the government is expected to make any important announcements it chooses in the form of a statement to MPs in the Commons Chamber, where questions can be asked about it afterwards. Statements can also take place or be repeated in the Lords.

If a statement like this has not been made voluntarily by a minister, and either House thinks that current events warrant one, a minister can be summoned to make a statement that same day. This is done by an MP applying for an Urgent Question in the Commons, or a member of the Lords requesting a Private Notice Question.

Debates and decisions

The day's main agenda item in each House is often a proposal that the government is asking Parliament to agree to. A minister begins by explaining the government's proposal fully; this is usually followed by a speech from the shadow minister on the opposition benches and then a range of speeches follow from across the House. A minister is expected to finish by responding to any questions and concerns that have been raised during the debate.

Debates are designed to help inform MPs

and Lords before they take decisions by making sure they have heard a range of views and considered different perspectives. Debates in the Commons allow MPs to express any relevant concerns raised by local constituents; in the Lords they are a chance for members to put their experience and professional knowledge to good use.

At the end of the debate, the proposal may be put to the House for decision, either in favour or against the proposal. If the decision is contested, a 'division' takes place where the votes of those for and against the proposal are counted in separate division lobbies and names are put on the record.

Some questions can be settled like this in one sitting, whereas decisions on complex changes to legislation take much longer. A single government bill (proposal for a new law) can entail many days of debates in each House before it is finally passed by Parliament.

To see how any MP or member of the Lords has voted in a division, and to read the transcript of any debate, statement or question in Parliament, go to hansard.parliament.uk

You can also watch all the proceedings live or on catch up on parliamentlive.tv

I'd like that in writing, please...

When MPs and members of the Lords are seeking more in-depth or technical information, they will normally use a written question rather than asking it in the Chamber. More than 5,000 written questions are put to ministers in a typical month and all the answers are published at: parliament.uk/about/how/business/written-answers/

On the committee corridor

Some of the most important scrutiny work in Parliament is done by committees - smaller groups of members that are given a specific remit or task to complete and report on.

There are two main types: select committees, which are used in both Houses, and legislation committees, which are used only by the Commons.

Select committees are small, cross-party groups of 11 or so members, who work together to investigate something and reach a consensus on it, before reporting back with their findings and recommendations.

A select committee typically starts a new investigation with a 'call for evidence', inviting anyone in the country with an interest or relevant experience to send them information. Some people are offered

the chance to answer the committee's questions in person, at a public hearing. The committee can then put their questions and concerns to the ministers or officials responsible to hear their perspective.

Then, based upon all the information it has gathered, the committee draws up a report containing its conclusions and any recommendations for how things could be improved. Because the recommendations are agreed across party lines, they normally carry greater weight. The government is expected to respond to the report within two months.

In this way, select committees not only work to make decision-makers accountable; they can also help to shape future decisions.

Learn more about select committees: parliament.uk/about/how/committees/select/

House of Commons **legislation committees** work very differently to select committees. These include Public Bill Committees, which are appointed in the Commons to undertake the committee stage of most bills. The committee stage is where line-by-line scrutiny of new legislation takes place: there is an opportunity for members of the public to send in their views, and MPs can

begin to suggest changes to the wording of the bill.

Legislation committees have 20-30 members and look and behave rather like a mini-Commons chamber, with government and opposition spokespeople leading the discussions, a neutral Chair and an in-built government majority. There is no equivalent to these committees in the Lords. Instead, any member can take part in the committee stage of bills in the Lords Chamber.

Political Parties in the UK Parliament

Political parties play a role in how Parliament functions day to day. Each party appoints its own team of business managers (known as whips) who meet together regularly to agree the week's agenda in each House and who then make sure their own members know what is happening and when. In the Lords, the Crossbenchers (members who do not belong to a political party) appoint a Convenor to ensure they can have a say in planning decisions.



Why two Houses?

Like many other parliaments around the world, the UK Parliament is bicameral - meaning it has two Chambers. The composition, traditions and remit of each House are different, with the work of each House intended to complement the other.

Members of the House of Commons have been directly elected by the UK public. It is the outcome of a general election that determines which party can form the UK government. Ultimately, the government of the day in the UK can only stay in office for as long as it has the support of enough MPs in the House of Commons. This has meant that:

- almost every MP is a member of a political party and loyalty to the party is seen as important
- the party in government usually has an in-built majority and can control the agenda and timetable of events in the House

Members of the House of Lords will have already had successful careers in their chosen fields when they join. They are valued for their expertise, experience and ability to take a longer-term view, rather than for loyalty to a particular party. This has tended to mean:

- party loyalty is less strong and a fifth of members do not belong to any political party
- no party has an overall majority in the Lords




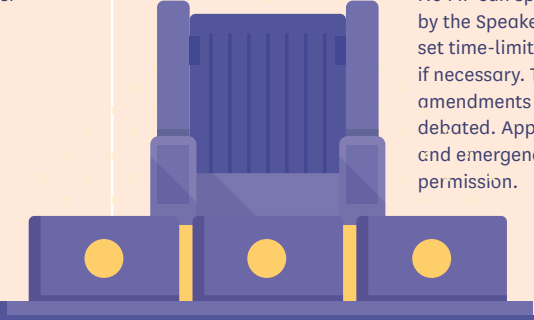

Lords members set their own agenda and are allowed more time and freedom to speak during debates

Differences like these can mean the Lords sometimes reaches different decisions to the House of Commons. When this happens, it may ask the Commons to think again about a decision. In this way it works as a revising Chamber.

You can find a fuller list of differences between the House of Commons and the House of Lords on the next page.



Key differences between the two Houses

Key Difference	HOUSE OF COMMONS	HOUSE OF LORDS
Membership	<p>The House of Commons is directly elected by the public.</p> 	<p>Most members of the House of Lords are appointed for their lifetime.</p>
Legislative powers	<p>Approval by the Commons is required for all UK legislation.</p>	<p>The Lords does not have the same powers as the Commons. Crucially, the Lords cannot change decisions by the Commons to raise taxes or spend public money.</p> <p>However, for other measures, the Lords can act as a check on government power by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - asking the Commons to think again about a decision - delaying a measure for a whole year if no agreement can be reached. <p>By convention, the Lords do not obstruct measures that a government promised in their election manifesto.</p>
Party composition	<p>The government usually has a working majority. Almost all MPs are members of a political party.</p>	<p>No party has a majority. 20% of Lords members do not belong to a political party.</p> 
Timetabling	<p>The government can choose what is discussed on most days. It can also decide how long can be spent on each item - including setting deadlines by which bill stages must be completed.</p>	 <p>The Lords is self-regulating, meaning that its own members - rather than the government - can decide on how time is allocated.</p>
The Speaker	 <p>No MP can speak in the Chamber unless called by the Speaker, who chairs debates, can set time-limits on speeches and interrupts, if necessary. The Speaker selects which amendments to bills or motions can be debated. Applications for urgent questions and emergency debates require the Speaker's permission.</p>	<p>The Lord Speaker chairs daily business, but any member can speak or suggest amendments to bills (the Lord Speaker doesn't select them).</p> <p>All members are in charge in the chamber. There are agreed rules outlining how they should work, and any member can point out when another may not be following the rules.</p> 

Contacting an MP

If you want help from an MP, you should always contact your own local MP.

Who your MP is depends on where you live. Find the name of your MP, what they have been doing and saying in the Commons recently, and how to contact them:

members.parliament.uk/members/Commons

Find more about when, how and why you should contact your MP:

parliament.uk/get-involved/contact-an-mp-or-lord/contact-your-mp/

Contacting members of the House of Lords

You can contact any member of the House of Lords about an issue. Members represent the issues they are interested in - not geographical areas.

Find information about Lords members' experience and their policy interests:

members.parliament.uk/members/Lords

Learn more about how to contact members of the Lords: **parliament.uk/business/lords/whos-in-the-house-of-lords/get-in-touch-with-members/**



Want to know more?

Contact us if you have questions about the House of Commons or House of Lords.

House of Commons Enquiry Service



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