

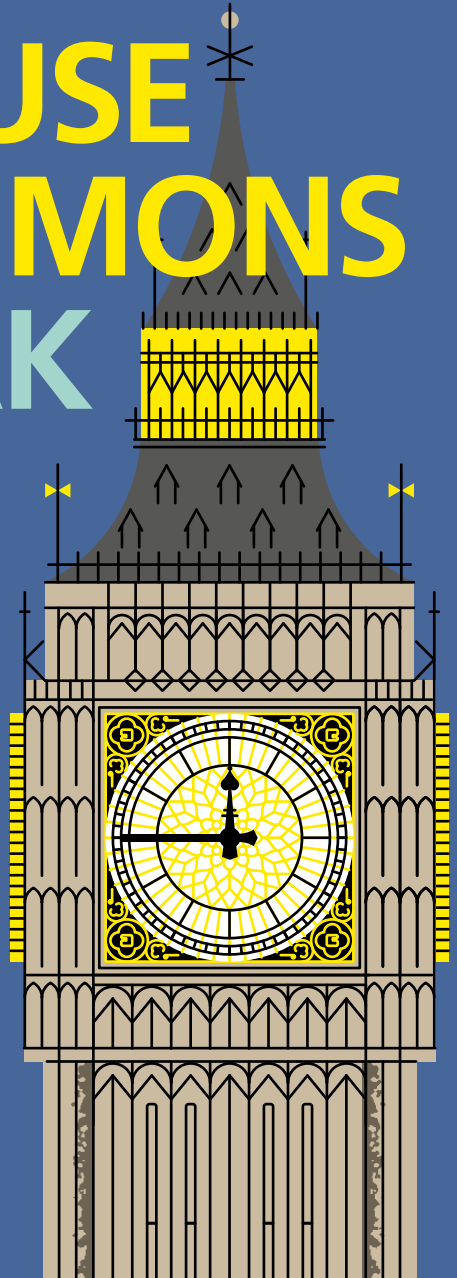


HOUSE OF COMMONS

# THE HOUSE OF COMMONS AT WORK

The House of Commons is open and accountable to the public. From the robust exchanges at Prime Minister's Questions to the careful consideration of government policy in a select committee hearing, you can follow the work of the House of Commons online, in the newspapers or on TV.

You can also visit for free and watch the House of Commons at work.



## WHAT DOES THE HOUSE OF COMMONS DO?

The role of the House of Commons is to:

- **approve new laws and taxes**
- **hold the Government to account, and**
- **debate the issues of the day.**

The House of Commons makes decisions about things that affect us all: our health services, the environment, transport, jobs, schools and crime. The Government cannot make new laws or set new taxes without the approval of the House of Commons.

## WHO WORKS IN THE COMMONS?

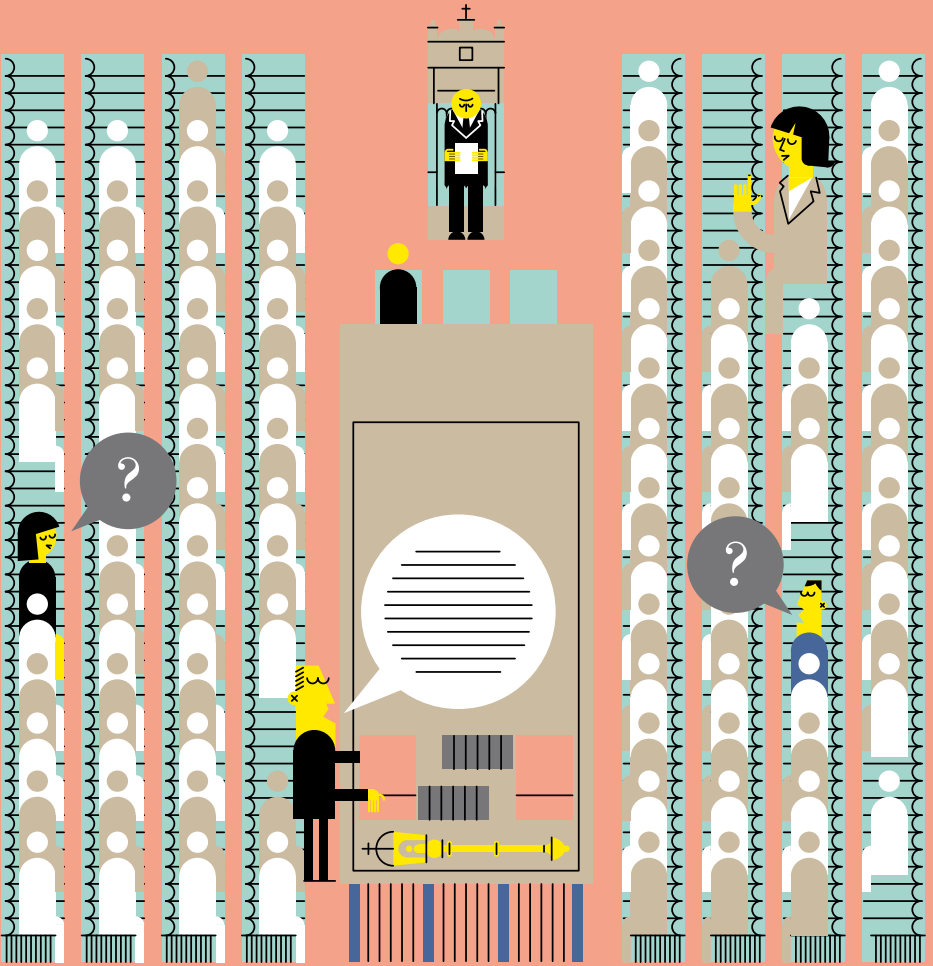
**The House of Commons is made up of 650 Members of Parliament – MPs – who are elected by the UK public to represent their interests and concerns.**

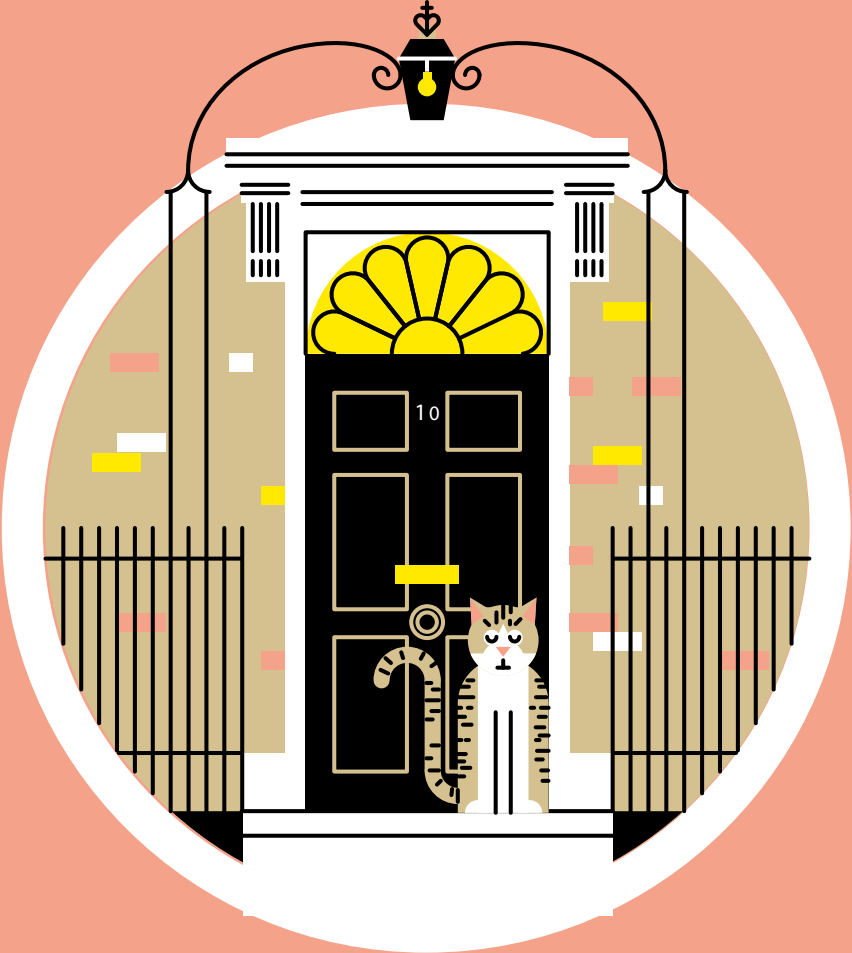
Each MP represents a different local area (a constituency) in the UK. This is to make sure that the whole of the UK is represented when new laws are made or new taxes are levied.

MPs work in the Commons on behalf of the people in their constituencies and check that the Government is run properly and that public money is spent wisely.

They also make sure that a wide range of opinions and viewpoints from across the UK are voiced by debating issues that people feel strongly about.

There are general elections every five years so that voters can decide who should represent them as their MP.





# WHAT IS THE GOVERNMENT?

**After a general election, the leader of the political party with the most MPs in the House of Commons is appointed Prime Minister and asked to form a Government by the Monarch. If no party has an overall majority, two or more parties can join together in a coalition to form a Government.**

The Prime Minister chooses several other MPs and members of the House of Lords to join the Government and become ministers. Ministers run the government departments that put Government policy into practice. The political party with the next largest number of MPs in the Commons usually becomes the Official Opposition. The Leader of the Opposition appoints spokespeople who are known as shadow ministers.

The Government runs the country.

Find out who is in the Government:

[www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/government-and-opposition/1/her-majestys-government](http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/government-and-opposition/1/her-majestys-government)



**MAKING OR  
CHANGING THE LAW**

## WHY DO LAWS NEED TO CHANGE?

**Laws are society's rules. With changes in attitudes and lifestyles, new inventions and medical advances, there may be a need to create a completely new law, or to make changes to older laws.**

Calls for a change in the law may come from an individual, a pressure group, businesses, charities, the medical profession, the police or lawyers. While the Government has the greatest say in which changes are actually proposed, it is the House of Commons and the House of Lords that pass or reject them.

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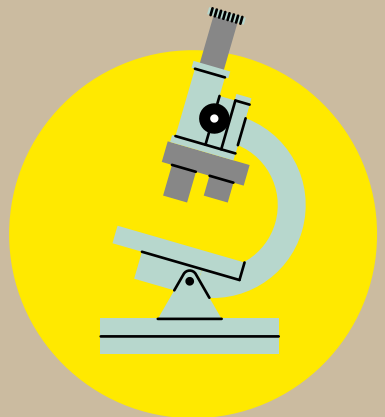
Since 1998, people who live in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland have been able to make some of their own laws with the creation of the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and Northern Ireland Assembly.

## BILLS AND ACTS OF THE UK PARLIAMENT

**A proposal for a new law is known as a Bill. If Parliament passes a Bill it becomes an Act of Parliament.**

Writing a Bill normally involves a great deal of discussion and consultation.

Sometimes the Government publishes a draft Bill and invites the public to comment; this draft version may be looked at by a select committee who will ask experts for their views on how to improve it. This is called pre-legislative scrutiny.



## WHAT HAPPENS TO BILLS IN PARLIAMENT?

**Before they can become law, all Bills go through the same set stages of scrutiny as they are considered by both Houses of Parliament.**

Most Bills start in the House of Commons where MPs have the opportunity to debate the general principle of the Bill and to make detailed changes to it. The process is then repeated in the Lords.

Any changes that the House of Lords makes to a Bill need to be agreed to by MPs in the Commons and vice-versa. This stage is called consideration of amendments.

Find out what Bills are currently in progress:

[services.parliament.uk/bills](https://services.parliament.uk/bills)

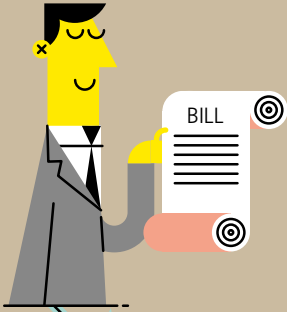


## HOW CAN I JOIN IN?

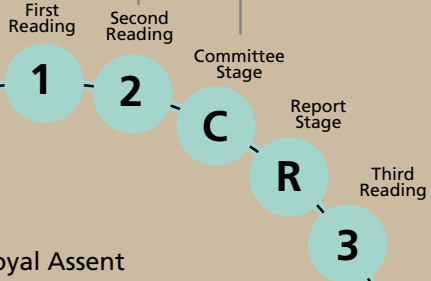
**You can contact your local MP to voice your opinion on a Bill as it progresses through Parliament. You can also write in with your views during its Committee stage in the Commons; experts and campaigners are often invited to give their opinion in person.**



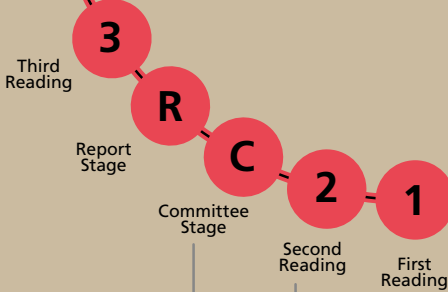
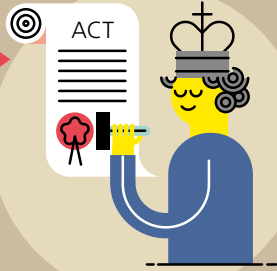
House of Commons



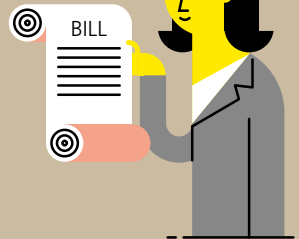
HAVE YOUR SAY



Royal Assent



HAVE YOUR SAY



House of Lords

## WHEN DOES A BILL BECOME AN ACT?

**When both Houses reach agreement, a Bill is ready to be given Royal Assent and become an Act of Parliament.**

This is a formal announcement made in both Houses – by the Speaker in the Commons and the Lord Speaker in the Lords – that signifies that the Monarch has agreed that it should become law. The Norman French words “La Reyne/ Le Roy le veult” (the Queen/King wills it) are still used.

## WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE BILLS?

**Nearly all Bills are Public Bills, which means they will affect everyone in the parts of the UK where that Bill applies. Most Public Bills that become law are introduced by the Government, but individual backbench MPs can also propose new Public Bills. Bills introduced by backbench MPs are known as Private Members' Bills.**

There are a small number of Bills that affect only specific individuals, places or organisations – these are called Private Bills. Private Bills are often promoted by an outside organisation, such as a Local Authority, rather than by an MP.



**HOLDING  
THE GOVERNMENT  
TO ACCOUNT**

As our representatives, MPs need to know what the Government is doing and why. They can do that by asking questions and requesting information or by carrying out in-depth inquiries. This is called scrutiny.

## **ASKING QUESTIONS**

**MPs use parliamentary questions to ask the Government for information, to challenge Government policy or to call for action. The questions asked by MPs often relate to the way Government policies affect people in their constituencies. This is one way that people's experiences are fed back to government ministers.**

MPs can ask questions in person – in the Commons Chamber – or in writing. Written replies allow ministers to attach supporting data such as statistics or documents. Ministers must answer written questions promptly and usually do so within a working week. All parliamentary questions and the replies they receive are publicly available.

## **QUESTION TIME IN THE CHAMBER**

**The most well-known question time is Prime Minister's Questions on Wednesdays – a half hour session in which the Prime Minister faces questions from MPs. It can be a dramatic occasion, with heated exchanges. The Prime Minister does not know the questions in advance and they may cover anything that the Government is responsible for.**

In fact MPs question government ministers on most sitting days in the House of Commons, with each department (e.g. Health, Defence, Transport) taking it in turns. Although many of these questions are "tabled", or submitted, in advance, time is allowed for some 'topical' questions at the end of most sessions.





## **URGENT QUESTIONS AND MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS**

Urgent Questions are a way of getting an immediate response from a government minister about a pressing issue. If permission to ask an Urgent Question is granted by the Speaker, the relevant minister has to come to the Chamber that day to explain what the Government is doing on the issue raised. The minister will then usually take questions on the subject from MPs.

Ministerial statements allow ministers to bring an important matter to the attention of the House, often in response to recent events or to announce new Government policies. After the minister has made the statement, MPs get to ask questions on the subject.



## **SCRUTINY BY COMMITTEE**

House of Commons select committees are small groups of MPs whose job is to monitor the work of Government closely or to look into a particular subject in depth. Usually, committees set their own agenda but they are sometimes asked to look in detail at a draft Bill or to investigate an issue raised by a public petition. Their reports can be very influential.

Some select committees investigate the spending, administration and policy of a specific government department, like Health, Transport or Education. Other select committees cross departmental boundaries: the Public Accounts Committee, for instance, looks at Government spending across the board and checks that it provides value for money for the taxpayer.



## **SELECT COMMITTEE INQUIRIES**

**Select committees work by holding inquiries into specific areas of concern. They have the power to summon and cross-examine ministers and their officials so that they can find out the facts. They are keen to hear from the public to find out what people think and to help them understand the issues better. They can undertake fact-finding trips to inform their inquiry.**

The findings of an inquiry are published in a report that usually contains recommendations for Government action. The Government responds to the report and will often take at least some of the committee's recommendations on board.

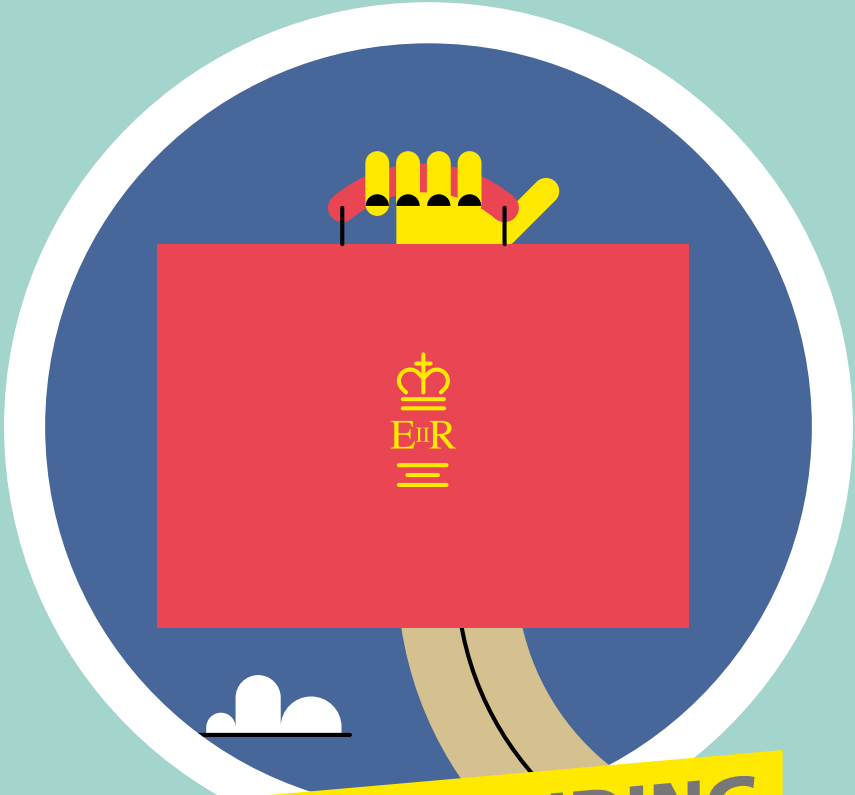
Find out what committees are currently working on: [www.parliament.uk/business/committees](http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees)

## **DEBATES**

Debates provide an opportunity for MPs to discuss Government policy and other topical issues of the day, as well as giving MPs a forum to raise matters that are important to their constituents. A day's business in the House of Commons often covers a wide range of subjects, from foreign affairs to care home provision. Many debates relate to day-to-day constituency matters: local hospital services, transport links, planning applications, libraries or an individual's case.

## **WESTMINSTER HALL DEBATES**

Since 1999, MPs have held extra debates in a Chamber just off Westminster Hall, providing more time for MPs to discuss matters of importance to them and their constituents. These debates do not replace the debates in the main Chamber of the House of Commons; they are held in addition to them. The Westminster Hall Chamber is laid out in a horseshoe, and debates here tend to be less adversarial than debates in the main Chamber. Select Committee reports are also often debated in the Westminster Hall Chamber.



**PUBLIC SPENDING**



## TAXATION AND SPENDING

**The House of Commons alone has the power to authorise taxes which provide the Government with the money it needs to deliver its policies and run services.**

MPs have agreed to taxes that pay for defence services, health, welfare and social services, schools and universities and transport systems. Taxation has also been approved for spending in areas such as industry, sport, heritage and culture.

Every year the Chancellor of the Exchequer makes a major speech to the House of Commons about the UK economy, known as the Budget statement. The Statement sets out the financial plan for the coming year.

## WHAT IS IN THE BUDGET?

The Budget is the Government's plan for how much money it needs and how much it will spend over the coming year. The Budget speech usually includes:

- details of any proposed changes to taxation
- a review of how the UK economy is performing
- forecasts of how the economy will perform in future

The Budget statement is usually followed by four days of debate on the measures announced by the Chancellor. These are known as the Budget Resolutions. Each day covers a different policy area such as health, education or defence.

## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Once the House of Commons has agreed the Budget Resolutions, a Finance Bill is introduced and begins its passage through Parliament like any other Bill. The Finance Bill enacts the proposals for taxation. The House of Lords has limited input into Finance Bills, as only the House of Commons has the right to introduce and amend Bills whose main purpose is to levy taxes or authorise spending.

The proposals in the Budget are also examined by the Treasury Committee – a cross-party group of MPs who investigate the work of the Treasury – which gathers evidence from industry experts, economists and interest groups to find out how the proposals will work and how they will affect people.

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Whenever your MP votes for or against a new law, challenges a Government minister or checks that public money is being spent wisely – he or she is acting on your behalf, as your representative. For more information on how your MP can be of help to you, see our leaflet [You and Your MP](#): [www.parliament.uk/hcio-publications](http://www.parliament.uk/hcio-publications)



## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

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