

# BRIEF GUIDE TO UK GOVERNMENT

## WHAT IS A GOVERNMENT?

The government is the group of people who the Prime Minister has chosen to help him or her run the country. There are normally about 100 people in a UK government, and they are called Ministers.

The Government is made up of MPs (Members of Parliament) from the political party that has the majority number of seats within the House of Commons. The political party with the next largest majority number of seats forms the Opposition to the Government.

## WHAT ARE GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS?

The main role of Government departments is to implement Government policy and to advise Ministers. They are staffed by politically impartial civil servants and generally receive their funding from

money provided by Parliament. They often work alongside local authorities, non-departmental public bodies, and other Government-sponsored organisations.

Examples of Government departments are: Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), Department for Environment and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), and the Department of Health (DH).

## WHAT IS THE HOUSE OF COMMONS?

Anyone who wants to become an MP has to stand at a General Election in an individual constituency, and if successful, they take up one of 646 seats in the House of Commons and serve a maximum term of 5 years in office at a time. Candidates are usually members of a political party, but can also stand independently.



The leader of the majority party in the House of Commons usually becomes the Prime Minister.

The respective leaders of the Government and Opposition sit opposite one another on the front benches in the debating chamber of the House of Commons. Their supporters, called the “backbenchers”, sit behind them.

## WHAT IS THE HOUSE OF LORDS?

The House of Lords is the

‘upper house’ in Parliament and is made up of Lords. Lords are unelected and instead are selected. Ex-prime ministers, ex-Speakers of the House of Commons and religious leaders are some of the people that make up the House of Lords. The House of Lords closely examines government bills and has the power to send the bills back to the House of Commons for reconsideration up to three times.

In addition to approving or rejecting proposed Government bills from the House of Commons, the House of Lords



Government Minister Jack Straw debates with MYPs at a UKYP civil liberties event at the British Library, February 2009

is also the most powerful court of appeal within the UK judicial system.

### **WHAT DO SELECT COMMITTEES DO?**

Select committees are small groups of MPs from all different parties who focus on a particular issue or the workings of a government department. For example, the Energy and Climate Change Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the

finance, administration and policy of the Department of Energy and Climate Change.

### **WHAT IS DEVOLVED GOVERNMENT?**

Devolution is where power is passed from central government to different local bodies. UK devolution created a national Parliament in Scotland, a national Assembly in Wales and a national Assembly in Northern Ireland. This process transferred different levels of

power from the UK Parliament to the UK's nations - but kept authority over the devolved institutions in the UK Parliament itself.

## WHAT DO MPS DO?

MPs split their time between working in Parliament itself, working in the local area that elected them, and working for their political party. Some MPs from the ruling party become government ministers with specific responsibilities in certain areas, such as health or defence.

When Parliament is sitting (meeting), MPs generally spend their time working in the House of Commons. This can include raising issues affecting the people in their local area, attending debates and voting on new laws.

In their constituency, MPs often hold surgeries in their office, where local people can discuss any matters that concern them. MPs also attend functions, visit schools and businesses and generally try to meet as many people as possible.

This guide has been adapted from the Directgov website. To read the full Guide to Government go to:

- [www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk)

For further information about how Parliament works you should visit the official Parliament website:

- [www.parliament.uk/about/how.cfm](http://www.parliament.uk/about/how.cfm)

For a full list of current MPs, Government Ministers and shadow cabinets go to:

- [www.parliament.uk/people/index.cfm](http://www.parliament.uk/people/index.cfm)