Many members find select committee work a particularly rewarding part of their time in Parliament. Committees, once appointed, choose their own subjects for inquiry and working methods. They offer members the opportunity to use their experience and knowledge to influence government policy or to develop in-depth understanding of areas of interest. In recent years, the profile of committees has grown ever higher, too, with committees more assertive about their role of holding the executive up to scrutiny. As well as inquiries into particular topics, committees have taken on new roles, such as holding pre-appointment hearings for major public appointments and seeking to go beyond Westminster via new approaches to public consultation and engagement, including wider use of the internet and social media. This guide has been produced to set out for individual members what opportunities are provided by select committees and how members can make the most of them.

Committees each have a small permanent staff employed directly by the House, and entirely politically impartial. Their job is to make committees as effective as they can be in performing the tasks given to committees by the House. The staff are there to work with every member of the committee and with the chair, and they will be happy at any time to discuss with members any aspect of committee work. My colleagues and I, who supervise those staff, are also available at any time to provide advice, and contact details are listed at the back of this guide.

Andrew Kennon, Clerk of Committees
INTRODUCTION

The House appoints select committees to consider particular subjects or areas. They take evidence in public from a range of witnesses, including Ministers, representative organisations and individuals. They otherwise meet in private, arranging inquiries, considering the evidence they receive and agreeing reports making recommendations to Government on how policy can be improved.

The best known committees are the 19 set up to scrutinise each Government department, including the Treasury, Foreign Affairs and Home Affairs Committees. But the range of select committee activity is considerable, also scrutinising policy emerging from the European Union and cross-cutting, inter-departmental subject areas such as human rights, science and technology, and the environment. As well as outward-facing committees, there are those that consider the procedures and administration of the House itself, seeking to maintain the institution as an effective and efficient body within a 21st century Parliament.
BEING A COMMITTEE MEMBER

Chairing a committee

Elected Chairs
Since 2010, most committee Chairs have been elected by the whole House and by a system of alternative vote.

Shortly after a general election, the Speaker informs political parties how many chairs of committees they are entitled to, on the basis of party proportions in the House. The parties consult before a motion is put to the House allocating particular chairs to particular parties. So, for example, in the 2010 Parliament, the Transport Committee was allocated to Labour while the International Development Committee went to the Liberal Democrats and the Energy and Climate Change Committee to the Conservative party.

Fourteen days after the House has agreed which chair will be filled from which party, Chairs will be elected. Members from the relevant party may put forward their names, but must be supported by 15 nominations from their own party, or nominations from 10 per cent of all the Members elected to the House for their party, whichever is fewer. Members may run for election to only one chair in any election. Multi-candidate contests may go to several rounds of voting, with the lowest-polling candidate eliminated at each stage.

Powers and role of the Chair
As they are elected before committees themselves are in place, Chairs do not formally take their positions until their committees are appointed by the House. Chairs, unlike other members of committees, receive an additional salary to reflect the time commitment and additional work required of the role, and this stood, in April 2015, at £14,876.

Chairs have few formal powers (and only a casting vote if formal decisions are required), but they do have a great deal of influence over how a committee works. Individual styles of chairmanship vary as there is no template for the job. Among the key elements of the role are: holding the committee together, ensuring that all members may contribute to choice of inquiry topics, to questioning sessions and to final reports, and providing the committee’s public face via media work when reports are published or other calls made by the media for comment. Chairs may also spend a good deal of time working behind the scenes—for example, maintaining good relationships with Ministers in the department the committee scrutinises, or meeting organisations eager to attract the committee’s attention or promote a subject for inquiry.

Most committees delegate routine decisions to the Chair—timing of meetings, for example, and organisation of evidence sessions. Chairs are also normally responsible for the draft Report discussed by a committee at the end of an inquiry.

Tenure of Chair
The maximum term of office for a Chair is two full Parliaments or eight years, whichever is the longer.

Becoming a committee member

Election and appointment
The House appoints members of its select committees. The number of places each party obtains on any committee depends on the proportion of seats it holds in the whole House. Individual parties put forward names for appointment to their places after holding their own internal elections, if necessary. Party whips will issues details of those elections to their own party members.

Early in a new Parliament, and after Chairs have been elected, a motion will be put before the House listing the names of those nominated to serve on new committees. Members are appointed for the whole Parliament, but in practice the membership of committees changes fairly frequently: for example, committee members who become Ministers will be replaced on the committee, while other members may seek to
be discharged for a variety of reasons. Members remain members of committees until a formal motion to discharge them has been agreed by the House, and these motions are tabled by the Committee of Selection, which usually meets each Wednesday.

**Being a committee member**

**What committees do**

Nearly 40 Commons select committees existed when Parliament was dissolved in March 2015, with more than 370 places to be filled on them. For members, then, a wide range of opportunities present themselves. The more well known committees are those that examine the work of specific Government Departments, but others do valuable scrutiny work. Most committees meet at least once a week when the House is sitting and they will on average produce 10 or more reports a year based on calls for written evidence from any interested party and oral evidence from witnesses they invite to meet the committee. Committees may also visit other parts of the UK or go abroad to gather information or evidence.

Members of the committees choose which subjects to investigate, and inquiries may range from simple one-off evidence sessions on a topical or contained subject to multiple evidence-session inquiries running over several months. Committees may also be asked to scrutinise draft legislation and are expected to examine departmental annual accounts and the major spending or executive bodies funded by the department.

The bulk of committee work is built around inquiries into particular topics – an area of policy, scrutiny of a draft Bill, response to some newsworthy event. Oral and written evidence are gathered and a report produced containing recommendations for the Government, and sometimes for other organisations, to consider.

**Time commitment**

The effectiveness of any committee depends on its members’ engagement with its issues. This, in turn, depends on members’ ability to devote sufficient time to the work, both for meetings themselves and in adequately preparing for evidence sessions or report considerations, both of which may involve reading many and detailed documents.

Members of committees need to set aside time for at least one weekly meeting of probably two to three hours. They will also require much reading time: a substantial number of documents will be circulated by committee staff in the form of, among other things:

- written evidence submissions;
- oral evidence transcripts;
- briefs containing suggested questions;
- correspondence from Ministers and others;
- draft committee Reports (and proposed amendments to them); and
- Government responses to those Reports.

Calculating the time required each week is difficult as committees’ work programmes ebb and flow, but a minimum commitment of the equivalent of a normal working day each week is not unusual.

Many members find the work rewarding, however. Immersion in a particular subject area uses their previous knowledge or experience, or offers the chance to develop a new expertise. In addition, committees have an impact on government policy: the most detailed academic work done on committee effectiveness suggesting that more than 40 per cent of committee recommendations are acted on by government. There is the further ancillary benefit for the higher-profile committees of significant media attention and the influence that that can bring.
COMMITTEE RESOURCES

Staffing arrangements

Committee staff

Each committee has a small staff, usually including a clerk who manages a team of four or five others. Those others typically include a second clerk and two subject specialists who will manage individual inquiries, and one or two administrative staff who will arrange meetings, send out papers and organise committee visits and witnesses. Among other things, the staff will:

■ Organise oral evidence sessions once the committee has chosen witnesses;
■ Provide briefing and suggested questions for those sessions;
■ Issue calls for written evidence for individual inquiries;
■ Draft final inquiry reports on the Chair’s behalf;
■ Draft amendments to those reports for other members of the committee, where desired;
■ Draft press notices for the Chair, and issue them when reports are published;
■ Maintain the committee’s web pages; and
■ Make travel and accommodation arrangements for committee visits.

Although the committee's staff will work most closely with the Chair in arranging meetings and drafting documents, they are employed to work for the committee as a whole and can be called on to help with any work related to a member’s role on the committee. For example, they may be able to provide speaking notes for debates in the House or external events on matters within the committee’s remit, or assist in drafting amendments to draft committee reports.

Other committee support staff

The House also employs a team of select committee media officers. Each media officer typically services four or five committees, and their work includes drafting press notices for inquiry launches or report publications, arranging press conferences and advising the committee on the likely media impact of any given inquiry.

Committees may also call for research support from other parts of the House Service. The House of Commons Library contains a formidable array of subject specialists who produce regular standard notes and other documents on most areas of government policy. The Scrutiny Unit consists of specialists with particular expertise in finance and the law. Committees may also commission external research of their own from a small budget. Finally, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology offers regular briefing notes and conferences on science-related topics.

Most committees may also appoint specialist advisers, either for a specific inquiry or to provide general advice across the range of the committee’s remit. Such advisers are paid daily rates for the job and are often drawn from business, public services, and academia.

Suggestions and complaints

Committee staff are supervised by one the House’s Principal Clerks, and they in turn are under the overall control of the Clerk of Committees (presently Andrew Kenyon).

Members who have any questions, suggestions or complaints about how their committee staff work should talk first to the clerk of the committee. Both the Principal Clerks and the Clerk of Committees are always ready to discuss matters affecting committee work with any Member. Contact details for the Principal Clerks and Clerk of Committees are at the end of this Guide.

Contact details for individual committees and their staff may be found on their web pages, at http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/.
PRACTICALITIES

Committee meetings

First meeting
Once a committee is appointed, the Chair will write to its members with the date, time and place of a first meeting. The agenda for that meeting will include: declarations of members’ interests; setting the time and date of regular meetings; and discussion of the committee’s working methods and work programme.

Declaration of interests
Committee members are required to declare both the interests that they are obliged to record in the Register of Member’s Interests and any further interests—whether or not financial—which, though not registrable, ought to be declared. Before the first meeting, the clerk of the committee will write to the committee’s members, seeking a list of their pecuniary interests, and that list will then be circulated among papers for the first meeting to all members of the committee. At the first meeting, members will also be asked whether they have anything to add or change in the circulated information, and whether they have further interests which are not contained in the Register of Members’ Interests, but which might need to be declared. The same process will be followed whenever a new member replaces a departing member of the committee.

The basic rule is “if in doubt, declare it”. This ensures that all members understand each other’s interests in the subject area. Most such interests are not financial and are unlikely to be thought by others to influence a member’s decisions in their committee work. In rare cases, a member may have so direct a financial interest in a particular inquiry that he or she stands aside from taking part in meetings on that inquiry.

Meeting times and rooms
Most committees chose a regular day and time for that meeting to fix it in members’ diaries. This choice will generally be made at the first meeting of the committee.

Committees generally meet when the House is sitting (but can, except during Prorogation, meet when it is not). They also generally try to avoid clashing with the busiest periods in the House—Question Time, for example, particularly on Wednesdays, or the time when statements may be made. This means that most committee meetings are scheduled on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursday mornings, and pressure on both members’ time and available committee rooms can be considerable.

Meetings take place in committee rooms either on the main and upper corridors in the Palace of Westminster or in Portcullis House. Individual committees often have a preference for one or other location or even for particular rooms, but rooms are allocated by ballot, depending on the number of meetings taking place at any time and which committees are being televised (all public sessions are webcast; fewer are televised for transmission on the BBC Parliament channel).

Private and public meetings
The committee’s first meeting is likely to be wholly private. Committees take evidence in public, but their other deliberations—choosing and designing inquiries, considering reports and so on—are always held in private. Members should be aware of when public sessions begin and end, and should know that public sessions are webcast and sometimes broadcast, as well as being transcribed to provide written evidence records.
Committee procedures
Select committee meetings are less formal than debates in the House or in public bill committees. Members remain seated when they speak, and refer to each other by name rather than by constituency. Members sit around a horseshoe-shaped table, but need not sit on ‘party sides’, as in the Chamber and other committees. They may also use laptops, phones or tablet computers, although these should be in silent mode.

The general rule is that a committee quorum is a quarter of the membership, with fractions rounded up. For departmental select committees with a membership of 11, that means a quorum of three; for those with 14 members, the quorum is four.

Because of the less formal procedure generally adopted, most committee decisions are reached by discussion and without a formal vote. If a formal division is required, the clerk reads the names, and members present call ‘Aye’ or ‘No’. The Chair votes only in the event of a tie, and may cast that vote as he or she chooses. Formal votes are always recorded in the committee’s minutes, prepared by the clerk, and published on the website and, where relevant, in committee reports.

Powers
The formal powers of committees to require written and oral evidence are extensive, but are rarely used. Most requests for information or a witness appearance are met without any need to resort to them. Committees may call for ‘persons, papers or records’ from anyone except the Government or Members of the Commons or of the Lords.

Committees are also usually permitted by their Order of Reference (found in Standing Orders) to meet where they wish, to report (and thereby publish) their evidence and to appoint a sub-committee.

Committee papers
Weekly circulation
Documents for each meeting are circulated to members a few days before the meeting to allow time for them to be read and any questions about them raised with the committee’s staff. Committees circulate most documents electronically, and members are entitled to a tablet device (currently an iPad) on which to receive, read and annotate those documents. Committee staff will seek from members contact details so that the regular circulation can be sent to them or to nominated members of their personal staff.

Privilege, confidentiality and Freedom of Information
Confidentiality
As the last paragraph implies, many members will give access to committee documents to their personal staff. Committee papers are confidential to the committee unless and until a decision is taken to publish them, usually as evidence to an inquiry or as part of a final report. Members are responsible for ensuring that their own staff respect the confidentiality of any committee documents to which they are given access. The main risk is that confidence among committee members to reach a consensus on controversial issues will be lost if draft committee reports are disclosed before they are due to be published.

Disclosure of a document that has not been formally reported to the House—particularly a draft report, or a report agreed but not yet officially made to the House—is a contempt of the House. Disclosure of draft reports, even to other members of the House, is considered unacceptable. Where a document is leaked, a committee may investigate the circumstances of that leak and make a special report to the House. Any such report is automatically referred to the Privileges Committee and could lead to action against any member who had prematurely disclosed a report, including suspension from the House.
INQUIRIES AND REPORTS

Choosing inquiries

Committees do most of their work via inquiries into particular subjects within their remit. The scale of inquiries varies, and they can last from a matter of weeks to many months. So long as they remain within the terms given them by the House in their Order of Reference, committees choose their own inquiry topics and how they will conduct their inquiries.

Suggestions for inquiry subjects come from many sources, notably from the Chair and committee members themselves, the committee staff, interest groups and members of the public. Most departmental committees will select a range of topics for inquiry or other consideration from time to time, setting a forward programme that still leaves some space for urgent response to changing events, such as the announcement of new policy by the government or a significant media story breaking. For some other committees, the choice of subjects may be more obvious: the Public Accounts Committee, for example, considers reports produced for it by the National Audit Office, while the European Scrutiny Committee must examine documents emanating from the EU.

Some inquiries are very short, with perhaps only a single day’s evidence and a speedy report. Committees, indeed, may hold one-off evidence sessions without intending to report at all, but to add to public debate or air an issue of immediate or wide concern. Other inquiries may last several months, involving as many as ten or fifteen evidence sessions. Committees must balance the desirability of hearing from the widest possible range of witnesses with the need to prevent an inquiry from going on so long that it ceases to be topical or is overtaken by policy change or other events.

Terms of reference and the call for evidence

Once a topic has been chosen for inquiry, the committee may agree terms of reference and issue a public call for evidence, usually via a press notice.

Freedom of information

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 applies to the House of Commons, and therefore to its committees. Most information relating to committee work is routinely made public in any event: committees publish oral and written evidence, and also information about their work in a Sessional Return (which details the number of meetings held, witnesses seen and money spent by a committee, among other things) or in formal minutes. Two exemptions from disclosure apply to certain parliamentary material, in relation to parliamentary privilege (section 34 of the Act) and prejudice to the effective conduct of public affairs (section 36).
Questioning witnesses

Questioning at oral evidence sessions is intended to draw evidence from the witnesses, rather than being a means for members to make statements or outline their own views, which will be reflected when the committee reports at the end of the inquiry. The House makes training available in questioning techniques for committees which wish to take it, and the committee’s staff will highlight what types of training are available at an early meeting. The Liaison Committee encourages committees to treat all witnesses with respect and courtesy.

Reports

Reports and recommendations

Many inquiries result in a report to the House, containing recommendations to the relevant Department, the wider Government, and sometimes other organisations such as arms-length agencies. Once the oral evidence is concluded, the Chair is responsible for producing a draft report for the whole committee to consider. This will usually be done after one or more ‘Heads of Report’ discussions, when a proposed structure for the report and outlines of the narrative and recommendations will be put before the committee for discussion and agreement.

Considering and amending reports

Once a draft report is ready, members will be sent a copy ahead of a meeting to consider it, and will be given time to read it and to propose amendments either to the general text or to the report’s recommendations and conclusions. It is helpful if members can provide written amendments in advance of the consideration meeting so that proposed changes can be circulated to the whole committee and discussion be clear. The committee staff are always able to help draft suitable amendments and discuss what changes any member of the committee may wish to make. At this stage...
Publication of reports

Press releases

Once a report is agreed, a publication date will be set and a press notice prepared. Most committees delegate preparation and issue of the press notice to the Chair; some may wish to sign off collectively. Reports are usually sent to the media under embargo, up to three days ahead of publication, to let them prepare stories or broadcasts, and to witnesses to let them prepare their own media or other responses.

Press conferences and wider media coverage

The Chair, and sometimes other members of the committee, may be invited to give interviews to print and broadcast media on the report. The committee’s media officers are responsible for organising this, and the committee’s staff may provide speaking notes or bullet points in addition to the press notice and the report itself, if required. Committees may also hold press conferences on some reports, usually a day or two before publication and under embargo. Again, this will be organised, where considered useful and desirable, by the committee’s media staff.

Media comment and parliamentary privilege

Members should be aware that while what is said in committee hearings and in reports is covered by parliamentary privilege, the same is not the case with press notices, media comment or media conferences. Proceedings in Parliament have absolute privilege concerning what is said, so that members are protected against any allegation of, for example, defamation. Media releases and comments are not proceedings in Parliament, so do not have the same protection.

confidentiality among members about the content of the draft report helps enable the committee to come to recommendations on which they can all agree.

At a meeting to consider a report, the Chair will generally seek to hold an informal discussion to see whether any differences can be ironed out consensually. The Chair will then move on to formal consideration, going through the report paragraph by paragraph to make decisions on any changes not agreed informally. The Chair will then put a set of formal questions so that the report, as amended if need be, is agreed and made to the House as a whole.

Committees generally try to proceed by consensus, and divisions are rare. It is the case, however, that any member who wishes to record dissent to a report or to any particular part of it, can have that dissent recorded in the formal minutes of the report by pressing a division on individual paragraphs or the whole document. Committees produce a single report, so no formal ‘minority report’ is possible. Members who wish to propose an alternative report to the Chair’s draft report may, however, do so: if agreed, it will become the committee’s report; and if not agreed, but voted on, its full text will be recorded in the formal minutes of the report, and therefore within the printed and online versions of the report itself.

The House’s committees produce around 300 to 400 reports, or more, each parliamentary session, and the vast majority are agreed without formal divisions and as documents backed by the whole committee. This is generally perceived to be one of the strengths of the system.
CORE TASKS

The Liaison Committee
The House of Commons Liaison Committee is made up of the Chairs of each of the select committees. The committee’s role includes considering general matters relating to the work of select committees, and agreeing guidelines and core tasks for committees to perform. The current core tasks were approved by the House on 31 January 2013, with the overall aim of holding “Ministers and Departments to account for their policy and decision-making and to support the House in its control of the supply of public money and scrutiny of legislation.” The core tasks are:

Strategy
- **Task 1**: To examine the strategy of the department, how it has identified its key objectives and priorities and whether it has the means to achieve them, in terms of plans, resources, skills, capabilities and management information

Policy
- **Task 2**: To examine policy proposals by the department, and areas of emerging policy, or where existing policy is deficient, and make proposals

Expenditure and Performance
- **Task 3**: To examine the expenditure plans, outturn and performance of the department and its arm’s length bodies, and the relationships between spending and delivery of outcomes

Draft Bills
- **Task 4**: To conduct scrutiny of draft bills within the committee’s responsibilities
LIST OF COMMITTEES

Select committees

Departmental committees
Departmental committees are tasked with examining the expenditure, policy and administration of individual government departments. Membership is usually 11, although some, such as Defence, contain more members. At 30 March 2015, the 19 departmental committees were:

1. Business, Innovation and Skills
2. Communities and Local Government
3. Culture, Media and Sport
4. Defence
5. Education
6. Energy and Climate Change
7. Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
8. Foreign and Commonwealth Office
9. Health
10. Home Affairs
11. International Development
12. Justice
13. Northern Ireland Affairs
14. Science and Technology
15. Scottish Affairs
16. Transport

Bills and Delegated Legislation

- Task 5: To assist the House in its consideration of bills and statutory instruments, including draft orders under the Public Bodies Act

Post-Legislative Scrutiny

- Task 6: To examine the implementation of legislation and scrutinise the department’s post-legislative assessments

European Scrutiny

- Task 7: To scrutinise policy developments at the European level and EU legislative proposals

Appointments

- Task 8: To scrutinise major appointments made by the department and to hold pre-appointment hearings where appropriate

Support for the House

- Task 9: To produce timely reports to inform debate in the House, including Westminster Hall, or debating committees, and to examine petitions tabled

Public Engagement

- Task 10: To assist the House of Commons in better engaging with the public by ensuring that the work of the committee is accessible to the public
Committees on Members’ conduct
Finally, the two committees on Standards and on Privileges deal with matters relating to Members’ conduct.

FURTHER READING
Erskine May (24th edition, 2011), chapter 37
Individual committee webpages at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/

Cross-cutting committees
Other committees have broader subjects to consider, ranging across some or all areas of public policy.

The Public Accounts Committee, which has existed since the mid-19th century, may consider any public expenditure, and produces 50 or more reports each year. Like all committees, it has a small staff of its own, but it also has the assistance of the National Audit Office. The Public Administration Committee also covers a wide range of public policy matters, examining reports made by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and the Health Service Commissioner for England.

The Environmental Audit Committee monitors the contribution government departments and agencies make to environmental protection and sustainable development.

The European Scrutiny Committee assesses the political and legal importance of EU documents, deciding which should be debated in general European committees or in the House. Further cross-governmental committees consider, among other things, regulatory reform, arms export controls and tax law rewrites.

Domestic committees
The House also appoints some committees concerned with its own internal workings. The Administration and Finance Committees advise the House of Commons Commission on what the House Service provides and spends. The Procedure Committee looks at how the House works and its rules.
CONTACTS

Contact information

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