



Select Committees



A select committee is a cross-party group of MPs or Lords given a specific remit to investigate and report back to the House that set it up. Select committees gather evidence from ministers and officials, the public and organisations outside Parliament. Their reports are published and the Government must respond to their findings. Select committees are one of the key ways in which Parliament makes sure the Government has to explain or justify what it is doing or how it is spending taxpayers' money.

Select Committees

In the House of Commons select committees have been used for many centuries for many different purposes. They are particularly useful when the House wants to investigate something and find out the facts about it rather than simply debate it. The House delegates this task to a small group of Members who can gather information and produce detailed reports. In the Commons most select committees are appointed after a general election for the whole period up to the calling of the next general election. Occasionally others (“ad hoc” or temporary committees) are set up for a specific purpose and are asked to report back by a certain date, ceasing to exist once they have reported.

Composition

Most select committees in the House of Commons have around a dozen members, though some committees have more and some fewer. Ministers, opposition front-bench spokesmen and party whips do not normally serve on most select committees. The membership of committees in the Commons reflects the party balance in the House as a whole, meaning that a majority of each committee will be MPs from the governing party or parties. At the moment, for a typical 11-member committee the composition might be five Conservatives and one Liberal Democrat, and five Labour or four Labour and one from another opposition party.

Chairs of select committees have few formal powers and can only vote in the event of a tie but they play a key role in leading the committee’s work and setting the agenda.

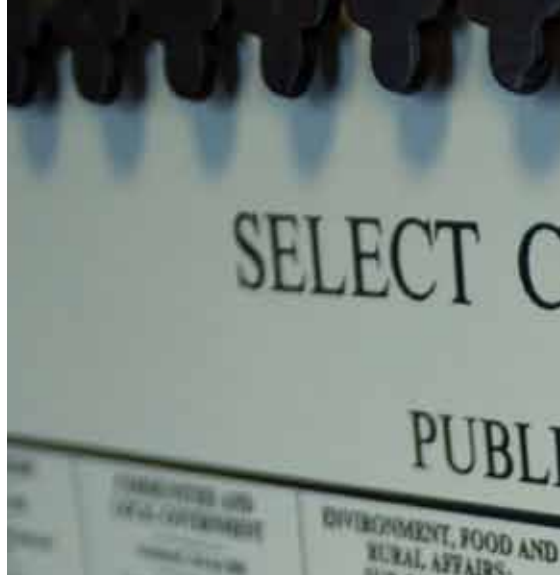
The allocation of chairs to different parties is also made to reflect the relative party strengths in the House as a whole. Chairs of most select committees receive an additional salary for their work.

In 2010 the House decided that chairs of most select committees should be elected by a secret ballot of all MPs rather than chosen by each committee. Once the allocation of the chair of each committee to a particular party has been agreed, MPs of the specified party can be nominated to stand for election as chair of a committee. Departmental committee (see below) chairs are elected by all MPs as are those of the Environmental Audit Committee, the Public Administration Committee, the Public Accounts Committee, the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, the Backbench Business Committee and the Procedure Committee. The elections take place about a month after a general election.

In 2010, the House also instructed the individual political parties that they should arrange for their members of select committees to be elected within each party in a transparent and democratic way. Each party group can decide on its own method of election. The exception is the Backbench Business Committee, of which all the members are elected by secret ballot of all MPs.

Commons Select Committees

In the House of Commons the main group of select committees comprises those which are tasked with scrutinising the work of government departments. There is one



committee “marking” each government department; at the moment there are 19, though if the Prime Minister changes the organisation of government departments the House will respond by changing the organisation of the departmental committees to match. The remit of these ‘departmental’ committees is to investigate three main aspects of each department: spending, policy and administration. They may also investigate other public bodies associated with their department.

Some select committees have a role that crosses departmental boundaries such as the Public Accounts Committee which has a special remit to examine the use of taxpayers’ money across the whole of government; or the Environmental Audit Committee which assesses the environmental impact of government policies; or the Public Administration Select Committee, which looks at the work of the civil service and monitors the work of the Parliamentary Ombudsman. These committees may scrutinise the actions of any or all of the government departments.

The departmental and cross-cutting committees decide upon their own subjects of inquiry and gather written and oral evidence. They will sometimes undertake fact-finding trips to different parts of the country and meet with local groups, or travel abroad to make international comparisons. When they have concluded an inquiry they will agree a report. As well as analysing the evidence and drawing conclusions, these reports generally include a number of recommendations for action directed at the Government (and occasionally at other

public bodies). The reports are printed, and published on the Parliament website. The Government is expected to respond to a report, particularly to any of a committee’s recommendations, within 60 days.

There are other types of select committee. The Commons Liaison Committee is made up of the chairs of all the select committees of the House. It considers and occasionally issues reports on matters affecting select committees. The Prime Minister appears before the Liaison Committee two or three times a year to answer questions.

Other Commons select committees are appointed to report on internal or ‘domestic’ matters, such as the procedures of the House or the administration of the House itself. The Standards and Privileges Committee investigates and reports on allegations about the conduct of individual MPs. The new Backbench Business Committee decides on the matters which will be debated by the House at the instigation of backbenchers rather than the Government or official opposition.



Select committees may sometimes be appointed on an ad hoc basis to examine, take evidence and report on some other matter such as reform of the House itself.

Lords Select Committees

Lords select committees do not shadow the work of government departments but are more thematic in their remits. They can take advantage of the expertise of their Members. Many Members of the House of Lords have been appointed to the Upper House because they have years of experience or have excelled in a particular field.

There are five major Lords select committees, specialising in Science and Technology, Economic Affairs, the Constitution, Communications and the European Union and each may appoint its own specialist subcommittees. Ad hoc committees are regularly set up to investigate other particular matters decided on by the House.

Joint Committees

Joint Committees operate in the same way as Commons and Lords select committees

but they are made up of Members from both Houses who meet and work as one committee. They appoint a single chairman who can be an MP or a Lord. Some permanent joint committees deal with quite technical matters; others such as the Joint Committee on Human Rights have a high political profile. Ad hoc joint committees are appointed from time to time to consider draft bills published by the Government or occasionally other matters of mutual interest such as House of Lords reform.

A full list of current Parliamentary select committees is given on the back of this Brief Guide.

Inquiries

Select committees normally announce that they intend to conduct an inquiry into a particular matter in advance by publishing terms of reference. They will, at this stage, invite the public to submit any relevant evidence that will help them in their inquiry and they will contact various interested groups and bodies directly to submit written evidence. They will usually seek written submissions from the relevant government

department(s). Having considered the written evidence, committees will generally then invite specific groups or individuals, including ministers and civil servants, to appear before them to be questioned in public.

They have powers to compel people (but not Members of either House) or organisations (but not the Government) to give evidence, but these are rarely invoked: the information asked for is usually provided voluntarily.

Guidance for any member of the public who wishes to give evidence to a select committee can be accessed on Parliament's website at: www.parliament.uk/get-involved/have-your-say/take-part-in-committee-inquiries/witness. Details of all current inquiries being undertaken by select committees can be found on the committee pages of Parliament's website or can be obtained by contacting the Information Offices of both Houses. Suggestions of subjects for select committee inquiries can be made in writing to the clerk of the committee: contact details can be found in the same places.

Meetings

When select committees meet to take evidence from a witness the sessions are nearly always held in public and all are either televised or webcast. The Parliament website carries live and archived coverage of all UK Parliament proceedings taking place in public, including debates and committee meetings of both Houses (see www.parliamentlive.tv/Main/Home.aspx). The material is then available from an on-demand archive

going back to 1st July 2009. Transcripts of proceedings are available to read on the individual committee's pages on Parliament's website soon after each session. The public can also visit Parliament to watch select committee meetings in person without prior booking, free of charge. Select committees are not, however, allowed to admit the public to any part of their proceedings other than the examination of witnesses.

Reports

Some committees publish reports every week, some only occasionally. The typical departmental select committee will publish a dozen or so reports a year, but the Public Accounts Committee will publish nearer to four dozen reports in a year. All select committee reports are published by the Stationery Office and are also available via the individual committee webpages on Parliament's website. Reports normally contain the full transcripts of oral evidence taken by the committee and some or all of the written evidence submitted during the course of the inquiry. Increasingly, the written evidence is only published on the web rather than in hard copy, but all of it should be found via the individual committee webpages on Parliament's website.

Committee staff are always willing to help with enquiries about a committee's work. The best place to start finding out more information is through the particular committee's webpages which can be found via www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z.



List of Current Parliamentary Select Committees:

Commons Committees

Administration; Backbench Business; Business, Innovation and Skills; Communities and Local Government; Culture, Media and Sport; Defence; Education; Energy and Climate Change; Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Environmental Audit; European Scrutiny; Finance and Services; Foreign Affairs; Health; Home Affairs; International Development; Justice; Liaison; Northern Ireland Affairs; Political and Constitutional Reform; Procedure; Public Accounts; Public Administration; Regulatory Reform; Science and Technology; Scottish Affairs; Standards and Privileges; Transport; Treasury; Welsh Affairs; Work and Pensions

Lords Committees

Administration and Works; Communications; Constitution; Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform; Economic Affairs; European Union; House; Hybrid Instruments; Information; Liaison; Merits of Statutory Instruments; Privileges and Conduct; Procedure; Refreshment; Science and Technology; Selection

Joint Committees

Consolidation Bills; Human Rights; National Security Strategy; Statutory Instruments

House of Commons Information Office

020 7219 4272
hcinfo@parliament.uk

House of Commons Information Office,
House of Commons, Westminster,
London SW1A 0AA

www.parliament.uk

©Parliamentary Copyright
August 2011