

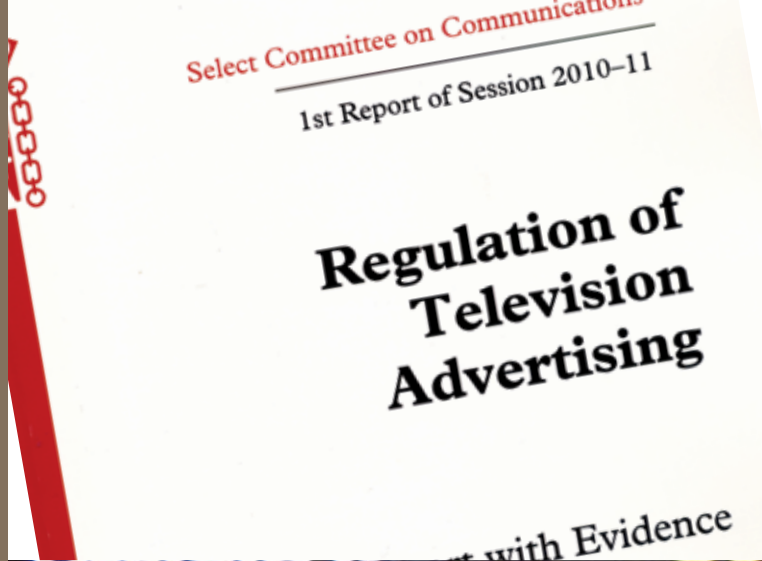


HOUSE OF LORDS

Briefing

Committee Work

Powers
Membership
How committees work



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House of Lords select committees

House of Lords select committees scrutinise areas of public policy. While House of Commons select committees mainly mirror the different government departments, Lords select committees are thematic and cross-cutting in their examination of policy issues: they look at issues more broadly, like science and technology.

The value of committee work

The most important aspect of committee work is that it enables policy and government activities to be scrutinised in detail and with regard to all the evidence. The kind of scrutiny possible in the chamber – by question and debate – is valuable but committee work allows for a more detailed approach.

The House of Lords lends itself to committee work because:

- its membership includes experts in many fields who lend authority to committee findings
- Members may have more time to devote to committee work which can make for a more considered approach to issues.

How committees are appointed

Committees are set up by the House, normally on a motion (a formal proposition) tabled by the Leader of the House. Recommendations whether or not to set up a new committee are usually made to the House by the Liaison Committee (an internal committee made up of the three party leaders, the Convenor of the Crossbench Peers, the Chairman of Committees and six backbench Members). The Liaison Committee does not usually involve itself in the re-appointment of committees at the beginning of each session but it does review the work of each committee (other than the European Union Committee) at the beginning of each Parliament.

Powers of committees

The motion to appoint a committee usually includes:

- its remit
- the names of its Members (including the chairman)
- its powers
 - to make reports to the House
 - to print its minutes of proceedings
 - to travel to take evidence and see relevant locations.

The power 'to send for persons and papers' (i.e. gather evidence) is taken for granted.

Permanent investigative committees

The permanent select committees in the House of Lords investigate a broad range of subjects – scrutinising government actions and informing public policy.



European Union Committee

Remit: to consider EU documents and other matters relating to the EU.
Members: 19 plus an additional 64 serving its seven sub-committees.
Scrutinises draft EU legislation and looks at broader aspects of EU policy.



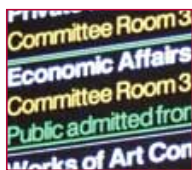
Science and Technology Committee

Remit: to consider science and technology.
Members: 14 plus an additional nine serving its two sub-committees.
Investigates activities across government and balances life and physical sciences.



Constitution Committee

Remit: to examine the constitutional aspects of all public bills and consider broader policy issues. **Members:** 12.
The committee also conducts inquiries into broader constitutional issues.



Economic Affairs Committee

Remit: to consider economic affairs.
Members: 14.
Also has a sub-committee to consider non-tax aspects of the Finance Bill.



Communications Committee

Remit: to consider communications policy.
Members: 13.
Formed to look at a broad range of broadcasting and communications issues.



One-off ('ad hoc') committees

These consider specific issues outside the remit of the other committees – like HIV/AIDS, the BBC Charter Review and intergovernmental organisations.

Joint committees of MPs and Members of the Lords

Joint Committee on Human Rights

Examines the human rights implications of all bills and UK policy for any possible human rights issues.

One-off joint committees are also set up to look at policy in draft bills (e.g. the Constitutional Renewal Bill) and constitutional matters (e.g. House of Lords reform).

Delegated legislation

The House of Lords also has committees which look at statutory instruments and the delegation of powers within bills (see separate briefing paper: Delegated Legislation).

Membership

The membership of a committee is cross-party and is determined by the House on the basis of a report from the Committee of Selection. This committee invariably takes the advice of the relevant party whip or the Convenor of the Crossbench Peers. Committees with the power to set up sub-committees appoint the membership of those sub-committees. A typical breakdown by party of a committee of 13 Members might be: four Labour, four Conservative, two Liberal Democrat and three Crossbench. The size of a committee varies: the EU Committee is big, it has 19 Members, but its sub-committees, through which much of the work is done, have only 10 or 11.



The expertise that characterises the membership of the House of Lords contributes to its less partisan nature. From left to right: Lord Lawson, former Chancellor of the Exchequer, has served the Economic Affairs Committee alongside other experts like former governors of the Bank of England, financiers and economists; Baroness Howarth has a professional background in childcare, family welfare and social services, she has served the EU sub-committee on Social Policy and Consumer Affairs; Lord Winston has chaired the Science and Technology Committee – a Nobel Prize winner, fellows of the Royal Society, the medical and veterinary royal colleges and former presidents of the British Medical Association and General Medical Council are among the Members who have also contributed to the committee's work.

How committees work

Committees normally meet weekly, sometimes more often. Their agendas are shaped by their remit. Most committees have very simple and broad remits, e.g. 'to consider science and technology' or 'to consider economic affairs'. Committees are free to choose the subjects they investigate, provided that they fall within the scope of the orders of reference. Some committees also have a specific task to scrutinise bills or statutory instruments in addition to conducting wide-ranging policy inquiries, e.g. as well as publishing reports like the Waging War: Parliament's Role and Responsibility report, the Constitution Committee has examined the Parliamentary Standards Bill and others. When a committee examines a bill, scrutiny tends to be very focussed and is usually conducted on the basis of written briefings prepared by the committee's advisers.

From inquiry launch to publishing reports

The work of a typical select committee or sub-committee is as follows:

- the committee decides the subject of inquiry
- a specialist adviser is engaged (an external expert in the field)
- background briefings may be held for the committee
- a 'call for evidence' is issued, inviting written submissions
- public meetings are held to hear oral evidence
- if necessary, the committee will visit relevant places and organisations
- following deliberation by the committee, the committee staff draft a report for the chairman based on the evidence
- the chairman's draft report is considered and agreed by the committee
- the report is published by order of the House.

Note: where a committee conducts inquiries through sub-committees, the parent committee will also consider any report before agreeing that it be published.

Committee reports

A report is a write-up of a committee's findings in an area of policy – or its views of the policy implications of a bill or instrument. It is written in a structured, clear and thematic way so that the issues are identified and considered in the light of evidence gathered, leading to conclusions and recommendations. A report is made to the House but is aimed at a wider audience too – the government, interested parties (e.g. EU institutions, business, academia etc), the media and the public.

Because of the influence of government in public life, most of the committee's recommendations (but not all) will be directed at the government. The government has undertaken to provide a written response to all Lords committee reports within two months of publication. Major reports are also debated in the chamber. Many committees continue to pursue their recommendations further through correspondence with ministers, promotion of seminars and follow-up inquiries. Most committees want coverage of and publicity for their reports to highlight the issues which have emerged during the inquiry.



Public engagement and involvement

Committees are keen to encourage public interest and involvement in their activities. Witnesses have almost always given evidence to committees in public and anyone can attend. Each committee's current work programme is published weekly.

Ways to follow the work of committees:

- every committee has a web page which gives details of its inquiries, membership and reports
- transcripts of oral evidence are on the Parliament website
- wherever practicable, selected written evidence is on the Parliament website
- committees are able to engage in e-consultation if they want to
- committee proceedings are broadcast – some are televised, all webcast.

Resourcing select committees

The greatest resource of a committee is its Members – about 160 take part in the work of the permanent committees. The work of committees is supported by staff, each has a clerk, a committee specialist, a secretary and a specialist adviser.

The EU and Human Rights committees also have the support of experienced lawyers.

Contact the Committee Office



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www.parliament.uk/lords for details of:

- reports and inquiries (past and present)
- written evidence and transcripts of oral evidence
- press notices
- membership
- future meetings.