Briefing

Bills and How They Become Law

Stages of legislation and types of bills
Passage of a public bill through Parliament and guide to stages

Stages in the House of Commons

**First reading**
- Formal reading out of the title of the bill by a clerk.
- The bill is ordered to be printed.

**Second reading**
- Main opportunity to debate the bill. A division (vote) at this stage represents a direct challenge to the principle of the bill.
- After second reading, government bills are timetabled by programme motions.

**Committee stage**
- Chance to debate and vote on the detail, clause by clause.
- Amendments selected by the chairman (advised by a clerk).
- All bills go to one of three committee types.
  1. Committee of the whole House – for constitutional bills and parts of the Finance Bill.
  2. Public bill committee – most usual procedure; 16-50 MPs, in proportion to overall party strengths.
  3. Select committee (infrequently used).
- A committee considering government bills has powers to send for persons, papers and records; holds up to four extra sittings when it can hear oral evidence in private and public.

**Report stage**
- A further chance to consider amendments, new clauses and, for MPs not on the committee, to propose changes.

**Third reading**
- The final chance to debate the bill.
- A vote gives chance to show dissatisfaction with the amended bill.
- The bill now goes to the Lords.

**Note:** For the purpose of this guide, the bill is assumed to have started in the Commons. Bills may equally be introduced in the Lords.
Queen’s assent formally notified to both Houses; the bill now becomes an Act (law).

Each House considers the other’s amendments. A bill may go back and forth between each House until agreement is reached.

Note: the initials ‘[HL]’ after the bill title indicate the bill was introduced in the Lords.
Stages in the House of Lords

First reading
- Formal presentation.
- The bill is reprinted in the form finally agreed by the Commons.

Second reading
- Debate on general principles of the bill.
- Government bills included in the election manifesto are, by convention, not opposed at the second reading, but ‘reasoned’ amendments may be tabled as a means of indicating dissent and can be voted on.

Committee stage
- Bills usually go to a committee of the whole House (in the chamber) or grand committee (away from the chamber) and rarely to other types of committee (see over).
- Detailed line by line examination.
- Unlike the Commons, there is no selection of amendments – all can be considered.
- Unlike the Commons, debate on amendments is not timetabled or ‘guillotined’.

Report stage
- Further chance to amend the bill.
- May be spread over several days.

Third reading and passing
- Unlike the Commons, ‘tidying up’ amendments can be made. Issues debated and decided at an earlier stage can’t be reopened.
- Passing: the final opportunity for Members to comment and vote on the bill.

The bill now goes back to the Commons for MPs to consider Lords’ amendments – ‘consideration of amendments’.

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R indicates the bill is reprinted at these points if amended at the previous stage.
Types of bills

A bill is a draft law. It has to be approved by both the House of Commons and the House of Lords before it receives the Royal Assent and becomes an Act of Parliament (law). This paper describes briefly the different types of bills and illustrates how a bill becomes an Act of Parliament. The guide opposite notes important differences between the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

Public bills
These are bills of general effect and relate to public policy. Bills may start in either House. The title of a bill which starts in the House of Lords is followed by the initials ‘[HL]’ during its passage through the two Houses.

Most major bills are introduced by ministers on behalf of the government and are outlined in the Queen’s Speech which sets out the government’s plans for each parliamentary session. Public bills introduced by a backbench Member are called private members’ bills. They must not be confused with private bills. Members of the House of Lords have an unrestricted right to introduce private members’ bills. However, because time is limited – particularly in the Commons – only bills which command general support will succeed in reaching the Statute Book.

Private bills
These bills contain provisions which explicitly apply to only part of the community rather than the community as a whole. Most are local in character, promoted by bodies such as local authorities or statutory bodies seeking special powers. Private bills are promoted by outside interests and may begin in either House in equal numbers. Procedure is broadly the same in each. Almost all of their consideration takes place off the floor of the House, where those whose interests are adversely affected by a private bill can have their case for redress heard by a select committee.

Hybrid bills
These are a cross between a public and a private bill i.e. public bills which affect private interests. A hybrid bill initially goes through the same procedures as a private bill where, if petitions are presented, it is then sent to a select committee; it is subsequently treated as a public bill.

Follow the progress of all types of bills on the Parliament website:
Committee stage on public bills in the Lords

Committee of the whole House
Many bills are considered in the chamber of the House of Lords with all Members eligible to participate. There are three procedures which may replace committee of the whole House:

Grand committee
The committee has unrestricted membership – all Members are free to attend and participate. A grand committee works in the same way as committee of the whole House, but no votes can take place. This procedure is frequently used for less contentious bills with a view to saving time on the floor of the House.

Public bill committee
A limited number of Members is selected to conduct the committee stage of government bills which are of a technical and non-controversial nature. Members not selected for the committee can participate but may not vote. This procedure is very rarely used.

Special public bill committee
This is a public bill committee which can take written and oral evidence on bills, within 28 days of appointment, before considering a bill line by line. Any bill can be referred to such a committee. This procedure is very rarely used.

In addition, a bill may be referred to a select committee. This procedure allows detailed investigation of the policy in a bill, with taking of evidence. The committee reports the bill to the House, recommending whether or not the bill should proceed. If it is to proceed, the select committee may make amendments and the bill is then re-committed to a committee of the whole House. Private members’ bills are occasionally committed to a select committee.

Pre-legislative scrutiny of draft bills

Both Houses of Parliament carry out pre-legislative scrutiny of some draft bills, in the session prior to their introduction.

The purpose of this scrutiny is to take evidence on the policies underlying bills, and to consider whether bills can be improved before they are introduced. Pre-legislative scrutiny should lead to better-informed debates on bills when they are introduced, and may save time in both Houses by identifying problems at an early stage. Such scrutiny may be carried out by select committees of either House, or by joint committees.

To follow the progress of a bill:

Contact the Information Offices or visit the Parliament website:

Lords: 020 7219 3107; Commons: 020 7219 4272
hlinfo@parliament.uk; hcinfo@parliament.uk
www.parliament.uk