

Parliamentary guide

A briefing paper from the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS)

October 2009

1. Introduction

This guide is for NCVYS staff and members and provides a background to what Parliament is, how it functions, how legislation is developed and opportunities for engagement in Parliamentary processes.

A young person's version is also available. Both guides can be downloaded from the NCVYS website.

2. Parliament

Parliament is the highest legislative body in the UK responsible for making and repealing law. It consists of:

- the **House of Commons** (646 elected Members of Parliament (MP) – each represents an area, called a constituency);
- the **House of Lords** (approximately 700 Peers – most appointed by the queen, some appointed internally, some are members of the Church of England); and
- the **Sovereign** (our current monarch).

The **Government** consists of approximately 100 members of the political party which has the majority of seats in the House of Commons.

The **Prime Minister** is theoretically chosen by the Queen, but in reality is almost always the leader of the majority political party. He chooses MPs and Lords from his or her party to be Government Ministers. Most Ministers run Government departments (such as the Department of Health or the Home Office). The most senior Ministers form the **Cabinet**, a body which decides the Government's policy and tactical direction.

The **Opposition** consists of all the political parties not part of the Government – the Official Opposition is the Opposition party with the largest number of members.

The **Shadow Cabinet** consists of Opposition MPs selected by their leader to examine the work and policies of each Government department. The Shadow Cabinet also decides the tactical direction of the Opposition, and can influence where the Opposition stands on various issues.

Those MPs who are not Ministers or Shadow Ministers are classed as '**backbenchers**'.

3. The work of Parliament

Parliament:

- examines the work of Government, through debates, Parliamentary Questions (PQs) and committees of inquiry known as Select Committees;
- makes laws (legislation);
- controls finance – only the House of Commons can give permission for the Government to control taxes;
- protects the individual – by examining the work of the Government, and by allowing individuals to complain to their MPs;
- examines European proposals; and
- debates current affairs – both the House of Commons and the House of Lords hold general debates.

4. Parliamentary Year

A **Parliament** can last a maximum of five years and runs from one general election to the next.

A **session** of Parliament runs from the State Opening of Parliament (usually October/November) through to the following October/November. If there is an election the Session begins after the election and runs to the Autumn the following year e.g. May 97 to November 98.

Recess – a break within a session (e.g. Christmas, Easter, Summer).

Prorogation – the gap between the end of one session and the State Opening of the next.

Dissolution – the end of one Parliament before an election and the beginning of the next.

5. How an idea becomes law

Idea

This might come from a range of sources including Government, MPs, the media, charities, research or current affairs.



Green Paper

Govt sets out its plans in order to get discussion. Each Department decides whether to publish discussion papers for general release: some are sent only to a predetermined list of consultees.



Consultation

This should last at least 12 weeks allowing people to tell the Govt how its plans will affect them.





White Paper

These are statements of policy for the Govt and often set out proposals for legislative changes. They sometimes invite comments



Bill

This is a new piece of legislation, typically informed by a White (and/or) Green Paper, although this is not always the case.



Parliament

The Bill then goes through stages in the Houses of Parliament. Most Bills can start either in the House of Lords or the House of Commons, and then pass a number of stages before passing through the other House.



The first reading

The Bill is presented to Parliament, where Peers and MPs can read it in full.



The second reading

The Minister in charge of the Bill starts a debate, where the main ideas in the Bill are talked about. Then it is voted on, if a majority vote for it, it will go to the next stage, if not it doesn't go any further. (This is very unusual)



The committee stage

A committee of MPs from all parties looks at the Bill, and suggests amendments. These are voted on, and a new version of the Bill is printed. This stage can last one meeting or several months. These committees used to be known as Standing Committees, but are now called Public Bill Committees and have 16-50 members, in proportion to overall party strengths. Occasionally a Committee of Whole House or an existing Select Committee is used instead of forming a Public Bill Committee.



The report stage

The changed Bill is presented to Parliament. If MPs don't agree with the changes made, new changes can be made, but sending a whole Bill back to the committee to be debated again is unusual.



The third reading

This is normally immediately after the report stage and is the final chance to debate before there is a vote to either accept or reject the Bill.



Passage through the other House

The Bill goes through the same stages as in the first House. If there are any changes made in the second House, the Bill has to go back to the first House so they can vote on the new changes. This is sometimes called 'ping pong'.



Royal assent

The Bill is given royal assent by the Queen and becomes a law. It is then known as an Act of Parliament.

6. Consultation Papers

Green Papers and **White Papers** used to be the only types of consultation papers, but now Government departments do not stick rigidly to these categories. There are a variety of documents which organisations and individuals can make comments on.

NCVYS consultation responses

On behalf of its membership, NCVYS responds to Government consultations that are relevant to young people and the voluntary and community youth sector. This gives NCVYS members the opportunity to directly feed into policymaking.

Recent consultations that NCVYS has responded to include:

- Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) consultation on the Children, Young People and Family Grant;
- Office of the Third Sector and Compact Voice consultation on refreshing the Compact; and
- Low Pay Commission consultation on the National Minimum Wage for Apprentices.

In 2008, NCVYS produced a thorough, evidence-based response to the DCSF call for evidence on youth sector support arrangements. NCVYS recommended that proposals for a single, lead agency for the youth sector were not taken forward. Following the a review of responses, the DCSF rejected the proposal.

Full details of NCVYS's response to the call for evidence >>

<http://www.ncvys.org.uk/index.php?alias=Call%20for%20Evidence>

All responses can be downloaded from the NCVYS website >>

<http://www.ncvys.org.uk/index.php?page=718>

The Government has issues Draft Bills for consultation. Information about consultation papers can be found on each Government Department website.

NCVYS and lobbying

NCVYS is part of several lobbying groups. Recent activity has included:

- lobbying for amendments to the Equality Bill as part of the Young Equals Steering Group;
- lobbying for amendments to the Apprenticeship, School, Children and Learners Bill as part of Participation Works; and
- lobbying against proposed changes to water rate charges which will be addressed in the forthcoming Flood and Water Management Bill as part of the Community Sector Law Monitoring Group.

7. Types of Bill

Public Bills are general and relate to public policy. Most major Bills are introduced by Ministers and are outlined in the Queen's Speech.

Private Members' Bills are introduced by backbenchers. These bills can be opposed by members of the public by writing to their MP, writing to the relevant government department, lobbying Parliament directly or submitting evidence to the relevant Public Bill Committee.

Private Bills are those that explicitly apply to only part of the community – most are local in character. They are prompted by outside interests and receive the majority of their consideration off the floor of the House.

8. Secondary legislation or Statutory Instruments

Most Acts do not include the detail needed to implement them, so this is produced in the form of a Statutory Instrument (SI), also called secondary legislation. During this process, there is an opportunity for interested organisations and individuals to be involved in consultation at the drafting stage.

9. Select Committees

These are groups of MPs (and sometimes members of House of Lords) who gather detailed information and produce reports. Findings are reported to the House of Commons, printed, and published on the Parliament website. The Government then usually has 60 days to reply to the Committee's recommendations, and normally does so in the form of a White Paper.

There are different types of **Select Committees**:

- Departmental – one for each Government department;
- Domestic Select Committees – examining the internal workings and services of the House.
- Joint Committees with the House of Lords which consider Consolidation Bills, Statutory Instruments, Human Rights and Tax Simplification Bills;
- Internal non-department select committees that cover cross-departmental issues;
- Topical non-department select committees that cover cross-departmental issues; and
- National and regional select committees

Most of these committees have the power to request evidence from Government departments and to put a call out for evidence from those with an interest in the subject under examination.

A list of the members of all Government committees can be found here:

http://www.parliament.uk/mpslordsandoffices/mps_and_lords/selcom.cfm#169

As well as the Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, other potentially relevant Select Committees include: Communities and Local Government; Human Rights (Joint Committee consisting of members of House of Commons and House of Lords); Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee.

Children, Schools and Families Select Committee

An example of a Select Committee that is relevant to NCVYS and its members is the Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, whose formal remit of the Committee is to examine the administration, expenditure and policy of the Department for Children, Schools and Families. The Committee's remit also covers the work of Ofsted and non-departmental public bodies. Further information, including contact details, is here:

http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/csf.cfm.

Members of the Children, Schools and Families Select Committee as of 12 September 2009 are:

Member	Constituency	Party
Mr Barry Sheerman MP (Chairman)	Huddersfield	Labour
Mrs Annette Brooke MP	Mid Dorset and Poole North	Liberal Democrats
Mr Douglas Carswell MP	Harwich	Conservative
Mr David Chaytor MP	Bury North	Labour
Mrs Sharon Hodgson MP	Gateshead East and Washington West	Labour
Paul Holmes MP	Chesterfield	Liberal Democrats
Fiona Mactaggart MP	Slough	Labour
Mr Andrew Pelling MP	Croydon Central	Independent
Mr Andy Slaughter MP	Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush	Labour
Helen Southworth MP	Warrington South	Labour
Mr Graham Stuart MP	Beverley & Holderness	Conservative
Mr Edward Timpson MP	Crewe and Nantwich	Conservative
Derek Twigg MP	Halton	Labour
Lynda Waltho MP	Stourbridge	Labour

Attending Committees

Public committee sessions are open to everyone, including the press. There are meetings Monday to Thursday when Parliament is in session (meeting). Committee meetings for both Houses take place in the Palace of Westminster (go to St. Stephen's Entrance), and some House of Commons committees are held in Portcullis House, located on Victoria Embankment.

When a Committee conducts an inquiry they often request written evidence from interested parties. The committee will issue a press notice outlining the main themes of inquiry, or terms of reference, which will invite interested parties to submit written evidence. Committees may also identify possible witnesses that they wish to take oral evidence from.

NCVYS members have previously been invited to present written and oral evidence to Select Committees and such engagement represents an opportunity for the youth sector to engage in the Parliamentary process.

More details on written and oral evidence can be found here:
<http://www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/witnessguide.pdf>

10. Early Day Motions (EDMs)

Early Day Motions (EDMs) allow MPs to put on record their opinion on a subject and canvas support for it. Very few **EDMs** are actually debated in the Houses, they are more typically used for reasons such as publicising the views of individual MPs, drawing attention to specific events or campaigns, and demonstrating the extent of parliamentary support for a particular cause or point of view. They often attract public interest and frequently receive media coverage.

EDMs have a strict format. Each one has a short title and a sentence no longer than 250 words detailing the motion. Recent sessions have seen an average of more than 2000 EDMs. Typically there are only a couple with more than 300 signatures, around 25 with over 200 and the majority have less than 50. Even those that have a large number of signatures are unlikely to be debated.

EDMs are a further way for NCVYS members to engage with the parliamentary process. Some members have worked with MPs to table EDMs to raise issues of particular concern to the sector.

Voluntary sector and EDMs

Two EDM's were tabled in July 2009 to highlight the campaign against surface water drainage charges and its potential impact on the voluntary and community sector:

EDM 1909 SURFACE WATER DRAINAGE CHARGES 16.07.2009

Tabled by Timothy Farron MP

That this House is extremely concerned by the impact of changes to the way surface water drainage is charged that allows water companies to base the charge for processing rainwater at non-domestic properties on the size of the site, instead of the rateable value of the property; recognises the devastating impact this rain tax will have on charities, churches, community groups and amateur sports clubs; urges the water companies to demonstrate greater social responsibility towards voluntary groups; and calls on the Government to use the forthcoming Flood and Water Management Bill to grant Ofwat the authority to introduce social tariffs for charitable groups and voluntary organisations to ensure they are protected from disproportionately high price increases.

26 signatures

<http://edmi.parliament.uk/EDMi/EDMDetails.aspx?EDMID=39134&SESSION=899>

EDM 1874 SURFACE WATER DRAINAGE CHARGES AND THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR 14.07.2009

Tabled by Nick Herbert MP

That this House notes the impact of increased charges by some water companies for surface water drainage on places of worship, scout and guide associations and community amateur sports clubs; is concerned that the new charging method based on site area is unaffordable for these groups; is further concerned that Ofwat is requiring companies to set out their charging structures by 2010; calls on the Government to use the forthcoming Flood and Water Management Bill to grant Ofwat the authority to allow water companies to charge for drainage in a way they consider to be fair and proportionate for these customers; and further calls on water companies to recognise the value of the voluntary sector and their corporate social responsibility to ensure that customers are protected from disproportionately large price increases.

59 signatures

<http://edmi.parliament.uk/EDMi/EDMDetails.aspx?EDMID=39095&SESSION=899>

Further information on EDMs is available via:

<http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/business/edms.cfm>

EDMs dating back to 1997 can be traced using the POLIS EDM database:

<http://edmi.parliament.uk/EDMi/Default.aspx>

11. Parliamentary Questions

Parliamentary Questions (PQs) have a significant role, allowing MPs to hold the Government to account, using either oral questions to Ministers in the Chamber of the House of Commons or written questions.

There are a number of rules around PQs, in particular they should either seek information or press for action, rather than conveying information or advancing a debate, and they must be related to a matter for which the Minister is responsible as a Minister.

There are two main types of question - **Questions for Oral Answer** and **Questions for Written Answer**, which work in slightly different ways. Oral questions are asked and answered on the floor of the House of Commons. Oral question time is divided into two – the first part is answering questions tabled in advance, the second part is untabled questions. A random ‘shuffle’ ballot is used to determine the order in which questions appear, and only those at the beginning of the list are guaranteed to be reached.

In the House of Commons, **Question Time** takes place for an hour Monday to Thursday after prayers and each department answers questions according to a rota called the Order of Oral Questions – each department features roughly once a month¹. There are tens of thousands of Written Questions each session, and the convention is that they are answered within seven days of the question being tabled.

Further information on PQs is available via:

<http://www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/p01.pdf>

In the House of Lords Question Time takes place at the beginning of the day's business for up to 30 minutes on Mondays to Thursdays and questions are to the Government as a whole, not to particular government departments.

Prime Minister's Question Time is where the Prime Minister answers questions between 12:00 and 12:30 each sitting Wednesday. The session usually starts with a routine written question from an MP about the Prime Minister's engagements, and oral questions follow. The Leader of the Opposition gets six questions and the third party leader gets two.

PQs offer an opportunity for NCVYS members to engage with the Parliamentary process by encouraging an MP to table a question about a particular issue. This could also be a way to gain evidence, e.g. statistics, on the impact of Government policy.

NCVYS members and PQs

Graham Stuart, MP for Beverley and Holderness, has agreed to table PQs, on behalf of UK Youth, on the issue of non-formal education following a visit to a Youth Achievement Foundation. Graham Stuart MP will be tabling questions including:

1. To ask the Minister what steps are being taken to set up a system of formal accreditation for the non-formal learning undertaken by children outside school.
2. To ask the Minister what steps are being taken to address the root causes of exclusion of children from school.

¹ <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm/cmwib/order.htm>

12. Hansard

Hansard is the edited verbatim report of proceedings in both Houses. Daily Debates are published on the website the next working day at 8 am. Further information on Hansard is available via:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/pahansard.htm>

The list of all Bills currently before Parliament, and details of their progress, is available via:

<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2008-09.html>

Hansard can also be used to access 'Today in the Commons/Lords and Committee Debates'.

13. All-Party Groups (APGs) and All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs)

All-Party Groups (APGs) are informal cross-party groups that have no official status within Parliament. They are essentially run by, and for, Members of the Commons and Lords, although many groups involve individuals and organisations from outside Parliament in their administration and activities. Membership of APGs is voluntary, at a minimum the Group must have ten members from the Govt party and ten from other parties, of which six must be from the main opposition party.

Part of the group's title is determined by whether or not persons other than Members of either the Commons or Lords are allowed full membership (i.e. voting rights). If they are, then the words 'Associate Parliamentary Group' must be included in the group's title; if they are not, then the words '**All-Party Parliamentary Group**' (APPG) must be included instead, which is the case for the majority of APGs. There are over 200 APGs for different subjects and many further ones which cover countries..

A register of APGs can be found here:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmallparty/register/memi01.htm>.

NCVYS has compiled a list of those APGs relevant to its work which is available on request.

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Youth Affairs

NCYVS, in partnership with the British Youth Council (BYC) and YMCA England and Wales, runs the Secretariat for the APPG on Youth Affairs. The Secretariat organises the meetings for the APPG and liaises with the Chair of the Group on themes for meetings and arranging speakers. APPG on Youth Affairs meetings are open to all and are attended by young people, representatives from the voluntary and community sector, MPs and Government Ministers. The programme theme for the APPG on Youth Affairs 2009-10 is social mobility.

Details of the APPG on Youth Affairs are available via:

<http://www.ncvys.org.uk/index.php?page=277>

14. Whips

Each of the major political parties has a number of **whips**. A whip is an MP appointed by their party to organise the party's contribution in Parliament. The main job of the whip, however, is to ensure that their MPs vote in the way the party wants.

Each week the whips' office sends out a circular to the MPs of their party to tell them how they would like them to vote in the upcoming divisions (a division is when the House of Commons divides into those for or against a proposal). The divisions are ranked in order of importance. If a

division is underlined three times it is crucial that the MP votes according to the party line. This is known as a 'three line whip', and if the MP goes against it they can get into trouble with their party.

Rebellions within the party - when a large number of MPs decide to ignore the whips' orders - often attract a lot of media attention, particularly when an important issue is being decided.

15. Other useful resources

List of ministerial responsibilities:

http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/ministerial_responsibilities.aspx

How to address a Lord:

http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/members/lords_contact/address.cfm

Information about Parliament:

www.parliament.uk/about

Government website which links to relevant information on the websites of central government departments, agencies and public bodies:

www.info4local.gov.uk

Up-to-the-minute parliamentary news:

www.epolitix.com

Website of the UK government for its citizens, providing information and online services for the public all in one place:

www.direct.gov.uk

Provides links to the full text of all UK Parliament Public General Acts (from 1988 onwards):

www.opsi.gov.uk/acts.htm

Parliament Weekly Information Bulletin:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmweb.htm>

The Labour Party:

www.labour.org.uk

The Conservative Party:

www.conservatives.com

The Liberal Democrats:

www.libdems.org.uk

The Green Party:

www.greenparty.org.uk

The website of the 206 independent, non-party-political Crossbench Peers:

www.crossbenchpeers.org.uk

The official website for the Mayor of London, the London Assembly and the Greater London Authority:

www.london.gov.uk

The independent body set up by the UK Parliament which regulates party and election finance and sets standards for well-run elections:

<http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk>

The Hansard Society is an independent, non-partisan political research and education charity:
www.hansardsociety.org.uk

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