

Many of the most important decisions that impact our lives are made by local, national and European governments. This resource sheet is an introduction to how they work and how you can find out more.



Who works for us and what do they do?

In the UK we elect our politicians through a democratic system, where most people have a right to vote for the politicians they think will do the best job. This means we can hold our politicians to account and choose not to re-elect them the next time an election comes round. Much of what they do is on public record so we can call them out on what they say, what they do and what they don't do. There's lots of different politicians responsible for different things. Find out who has the power to act on your issue - and then decide what you want them to do.



Local Government

Your Local Council

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There are different levels of local councils depending on where you live. Many parts of England have two levels of Councils (for example at the higher level County Councils and at the lower level District Councils or Borough or City Councils). Other areas have only one level of council usually known as a 'Unitary Authority'. **Councillors** are the local politicians who through local elections are elected to make decisions for the people in their local area. Councillors have a responsibility to talk with communities and find out what they want and need. As well as councillors, councils are made up of the officers that actually do all the work to make sure that services are delivered and policies are implemented.

Local government is responsible for Education, Highways (roads and bridges), Transport planning, Passenger Transport, Social care (care for children and adults and disabled people), Housing (Housing strategy, council housing and benefits) Libraries, Leisure and Recreation (facilities and open spaces), Environmental Services (including food safety, pollution, licensing, waste collection and disposal), Planning applications and Strategic planning for the local area.

County councils, are usually responsible for services such as, education, transport, planning, fire and public safety, social care, libraries, waste management and trading standards.

District, borough and city councils, cover a smaller area than county councils. They're usually responsible for services like housing, rubbish collection, recycling, Council Tax collections, planning applications etc.

Unitary authorities and London and metropolitan boroughs. In some places there is just one level of local government that provides all the services listed above.

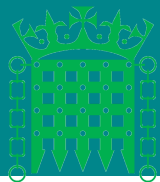
Combined Authorities (e.g. Sheffield City region) are when local authorities in a local area have voluntarily joined together and as a result have had some power from central government delegated down to them, for example transport and economic development.



How are decisions made?

Decisions are made by the full council and some council committees. The full council is a meeting of all the councillors (or elected members as they are sometimes known). You can see the agendas and minutes from full council meetings on your council website. Councils can decide to operate in different ways. Most councils have one councillor who acts as '**Leader of the Council**' and appoints the '**cabinet**' made up of councillors each of whom have a particular area of responsibility (for example housing, education, economic development). The decisions of the cabinet are checked by 'scrutiny committees'. The leader and the cabinet are responsible for policies and plans that are reported regularly to the full council. Most councils have **Mayors**, usually they don't have any power and their role is largely ceremonial, however some councils have an elected mayor that has much more power (e.g. London and Liverpool).

National Government & The Houses of Parliament



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There are 650 MPs (Members of Parliament) who are elected to make laws and represent people from their area (or constituency). MPs come from different political groups or **parties**, that have their own idea about how the UK should work. The party of MPs who win the most seats at the election become **the Government**. MPs from the next largest party or parties become **the opposition**. The role of the opposition is to keep checks on the government and what they do. MPs are guided by the ideas that their party believes in, however, they can also act on things that matter to other people, especially people that live in their area. MPs split their time between working in the House of Commons in London, working in their local constituency and working for their political party.

Never forget they work for us! You can email, call or visit your MP about any issue or idea you may have.

The **Houses of Parliament** are made up of the House of Commons where MPs sit and the House of Lords (made up of over 680 appointed members).

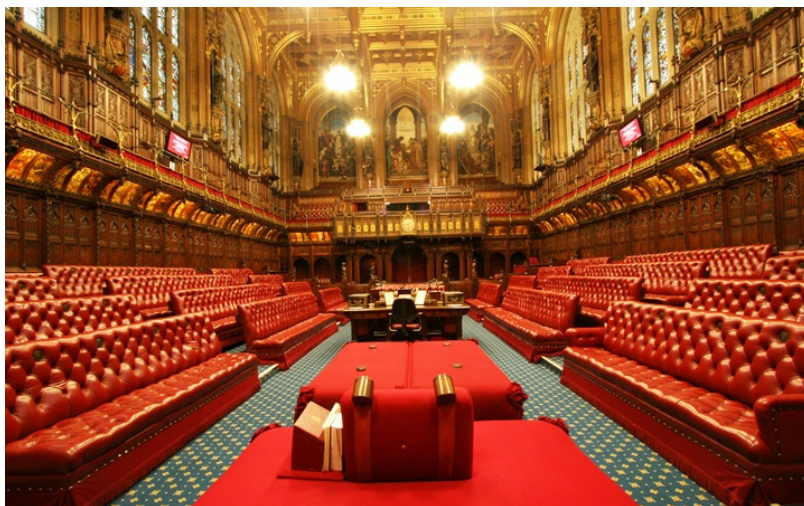
The people in the **House of Lords** are not elected, they are appointed by the Queen, on the advice of the Prime Minister). Lots of the people in the Lords are experts or care about particular topics. The UK Parliament has an Outreach and Engagement Team, they describe the role of Parliament as checking and challenging the work of the Government, making and changing laws, debating the important issues of the day and checking and approving Government spending.

The **Prime Minister** is the MP who is the leader of the government. They are also in charge of the 'cabinet' a group of the 21 most senior Ministers (MPs who are appointed as heads of government departments).

The main law making body in the UK is the UK Parliament. However, devolution means that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland can make their own decisions on certain issues called devolved matters. Following referendums in 1997 the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament were set up. They are able to make laws on devolved matters such as health services, housing and environment.

How are decisions made?

Formal decisions are usually made through a series of debates. For a law to pass both the House of Commons and the House of Lords have to come to an agreement (see the resource sheet 'How laws are made')



Find Out More



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Local Government:

- [‘Understand how your council works’](#) on the Government’s gov.uk website
- the Local Government Association’s website and their [‘Quick Guide to local government’](#) (2011)

National Government & The Houses of Parliament:

- Some of the videos on the UK Parliament website. [‘How Parliament works in nearly 60 secs’](#) is a great introduction
- [‘Checking the work of Government’](#) is an introduction to Parliamentary debates, committees and how questions are asked.
- Some of the guides on the UK Parliament website, for example [‘The House of Commons at work’](#)

The UK Parliament’s Outreach and Engagement Team is happy to work directly with groups to help them better understand how Parliament works. In 2017 the team ran a workshop as part of the Everyday Activism project with members of the Syrian community in Leeds.