Your Parliament
Make it work for you
The role of Parliament is to represent the people of the United Kingdom.

In order to do this, Parliament needs to hear your views and opinions on the issues that are important to you.

*Your Parliament* explains how the country is run and how you can make your voice heard.

July 2004

© Parliamentary Copyright 2004, Hansard Society 2004. May be reproduced for purposes of private study or research without permission.

Reproduction for sale or other commercial purposes not permitted.
Every person in the country is entitled to play an active role in the decisions that are made by Parliament.

Parliament makes laws and decisions that have a direct effect on you and your daily life. It deals with all of the key issues of the country, including:

- Taxes
- Education
- Health and social services
- Law and order
- Housing
- Transport
- Agriculture
- Environment
- Immigration
- Pensions and social security

In order to make the best decisions, Parliament needs to hear your views on these issues. There are many opportunities for you to have your say between General Elections.

People living in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland will find that some of these issues, such as education, health or transport, are also dealt with by the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales or Northern Ireland Assembly.

‘Parliament makes laws and decisions that have a direct effect on you and your daily life.’
Parliament is made up of the Crown and the two Houses – the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The House of Commons is made up of elected Members of Parliament (MPs). Members of the House of Lords are unelected.

Parliament is accountable to the people of the United Kingdom. It has two main roles: making law and checking the work of the Government. These functions are known as legislating and scrutinising. The House of Commons and the House of Lords are involved in both of these activities, although the House of Commons has more power.

The two Houses of Parliament are made up of members of different political parties, but the House of Lords also has a large group of independent (Crossbench) members. Parties enable people with similar ideas about how the country should be run to work together. Anyone can join a political party.

The Government is drawn out of Parliament. Every member of the Government, including the Prime Minister, is a member of either the House of Commons or the House of Lords. The Government is accountable to Parliament and to the people of the United Kingdom.

After a General Election, the leader of the party that wins most seats in the House of Commons becomes Prime Minister. The Prime Minister chooses MPs and peers who are members of his or her party to be ministers in the Government. The Government proposes the laws that will be considered by Parliament.

The Government is split into Departments which have control over different policy issues, such as the Ministry of Defence or the Department for Education and Skills. The Government makes policy and decides how taxpayers’ money will be spent.

The opposition parties also play an important role by challenging the Government and offering alternative policy ideas.
MPs are Members of Parliament. They carry out duties in both Westminster and their constituencies.

Each MP represents an area of the country known as a constituency in the House of Commons. There are currently 659 constituencies in the United Kingdom, which have on average around 90,000 people living in them.

MPs are elected in a General Election, in which people aged 18 or over have the chance to vote for candidates representing different political parties. There can also be other, independent, candidates. The Government can choose when a General Election is held, but they have to take place at least once every 5 years.

Anyone over the age of 21 can stand for Parliament. MPs come from all sorts of backgrounds, including teaching, business, the law and local government.

Your MP represents all of the people within your constituency, whether or not they voted for him or her. Your MP needs to know the issues that concern you in order to represent you properly.

To learn what your MP can do for you, turn to page 19 of this booklet. To find out who your local MP is, look on the Parliament website, www.parliament.uk, or call the House of Commons Information Office on 020 7219 4272.

You can arrange to meet your MP in Parliament, in their constituency office, or at one of their regular ‘surgeries’ held in your local area.

MPs have different responsibilities and priorities depending on their duties in Parliament, their role in their party, their constituency and their own beliefs.
Members of the House of Lords are known as peers. Peers are not elected, most are appointed. Many members have had a distinguished career in another field, and have high levels of specialist expertise. Others are former MPs, ministers and also Prime Ministers.

All bills (proposed laws), except financial bills, have to be agreed by the House of Lords as well as the House of Commons, and peers spend much of their time looking over bills and making changes. Some members of the Government sit in the House of Lords, which enables peers to ask them questions. The House of Lords also has select committees that consider specific issues, such as Europe, the Constitution, Economic Affairs and Science and Technology.

Because peers are not elected, they do not represent an area of the country, or a set of constituents, as MPs do. The main focus of the House of Lords’ work is examining bills and scrutinising the Government.

Members of the House of Lords are listed on the parliamentary website, and you can contact the House of Lords Information Office for details. You can write to a member at the House of Lords, London SW1A 0PW.

If you contact a peer, they might:
- speak in a debate about an issue you have raised
- ask a question to a member of the Government in the Lords
- table an amendment to a piece of legislation
- raise your concerns in a committee

If you want to write to a peer, always allow plenty of time for your information to get through. Remember that, unlike MPs, members of the House of Lords are unpaid and generally do not have support staff.

In Parliament, they have a number of roles including:
- Helping to make law by speaking in debates, sitting on standing committees, or voting to pass or defeat a bill
- Scrutinising the Government by asking oral or written questions
- Sitting on a select committee which looks at the work of a government department by holding inquiries and publishing detailed reports

Constituency work is a growing part of many MPs’ work. It involves:
- Helping to address constituents’ problems. Many MPs hold surgeries in the local area
- Supporting local campaigns and drawing issues to the attention of the government through questions, speeches and meetings
- Speaking publicly on behalf of the constituency

Some MPs are also members of the Government or are a spokesperson for an opposition party. This means that they also have responsibility for a specific policy area, such as health or education. These MPs have to balance their ministerial or frontbench role with their constituency and other parliamentary work.

‘Anyone over the age of 21 can stand for Parliament.’
People over the age of 18 can vote in General Elections in the United Kingdom. Voting is carried out by secret ballot which means that no one will know who you have voted for.

To vote, you have to register with your local electoral registration office. In England and Wales, this is housed at the local council; in Scotland it will be based at the local Assessor’s Office, and in Northern Ireland you will need to go through your Area Electoral Office. You can also look at www.electoralcommission.org.uk for England, Wales and Scotland, or www.electoralofficeni.gov.uk for Northern Ireland.

You can vote either in person or by post. Voting in person takes place in a local community building, such as a school or a church hall. You will usually be sent a voting card a few days before the election, but you can still vote even if you do not receive it.

Once inside the voting station, you will be given a ballot paper that lists the people who are standing for election. Put a cross next to the name of the person you would like to be your MP. Fold the paper in half, and put the ballot paper in the locked ballot box.

In England, Wales and Scotland it is also possible to vote by post on request, for all elections. Voting by post means that you do not have to go to a voting station in person. You do not need to give any reason for wanting a postal vote, but you do have to apply in advance. This can be done through your local electoral registration office. In Northern Ireland you need to have a specific reason such as illness, physical incapacity or absence on the day of the poll.
People have different opinions on nearly every subject. Although it is important that every view is heard, it would be impossible to run the country if everybody insisted on having their own way.

This is why people who agree on major political ideas group together to form political parties. Members of these parties may not feel exactly the same as each other on every issue, but they share similar values and beliefs about the way that the country should be run.

Anyone can join a political party. All parties have members who can get involved in local party activities such as campaigning, standing for local office, and helping to select the party’s candidate for MP.

Political parties are important for many reasons, including:

- allowing people to participate in the political process
- giving you choices at election time on how you want the country run
- allowing you to vote out a party from government if you do not feel they have done a good enough job

Pressure groups and single issue groups are also very important for our political system. They allow people with an interest in one subject to work together to try and change or influence government policy on that issue.

Political parties differ from pressure groups because they have candidates who stand for election. Political parties want to influence the decision-making process from inside Parliament, whereas pressure groups try to affect change from outside Parliament. This is why nearly all political parties have policies on the whole range of issues that affect the country.

Democracies work best when both political parties and pressure groups are strong – one to form governments and oppositions, and the other to push for changes on specific issues.
How are new laws made?

A proposal for a new law is called a bill.

Bills go through a number of stages before becoming law. They can start in either the House of Commons or the House of Lords, but all bills have to pass through both Houses before becoming law.

Most bills are introduced by the Government but individual MPs and peers can also propose bills. These are known as Private Members’ Bills.

The process of passing a law can be complex and time consuming, but the system does allow for changes and compromises, which should result in better laws being created.

Laws affect all the people of the United Kingdom. Members of the public are often invited to make their views heard in the preparatory stages of a bill. At this point, the government department which is introducing the bill will want to know your thoughts on the general principles of the bill.

The diagram opposite shows the usual process for a bill passing through Parliament.

To find out what bills are being looked at by Parliament at the moment, you can look on the Parliament website, www.parliament.uk, and click on ‘Bills before Parliament’, or call either the Commons or Lords Information Office.
Parliament is a very busy place – at any time of the day, there will be many different things taking place in both the Commons and the Lords. Here are some of the main activities that happen during a week in Parliament.

**Select Committees**

In the House of Commons select committees scrutinise the work of Government by holding inquiries and taking evidence from relevant individuals, organisations and members of the Government. Committees are made up of MPs from the different political parties, and each one focuses on the work of one Government department.

In the House of Lords, select committees focus on matters of public interest over a longer term. Their wider remits and distinguished membership allow for far-reaching and detailed examination of key issues.

Committees can choose what issues or policies they want to investigate. An issue may have topical relevance, a committee member may have had an issue drawn to their attention that they want to explore, or a new piece of legislation might have been introduced. Members of the public can submit evidence to a committee if they are interested or have specific knowledge on the subject.

Once an inquiry is completed, the committee will publish a report outlining their findings and recommendations. The Government will respond to the report, and sometimes there will also be a debate.

**Debates**

MPs and peers take part in debates on legislation and other issues of the day. These often focus on a particular bill that is passing through Parliament, and are an opportunity for backbench and opposition MPs and peers to talk about the bill’s general principles. They take place in the main Chambers of the Commons and the Lords and, in the Commons, often end in a vote (division).
How can I have my say?

There are many ways in which you can have your say in the running of the UK. It is your right to make your views known, and the potential is there for you to make a difference.

So what can you do?

Contact your MP

All MPs can be written to at the House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA. Many MPs have email addresses and fax numbers that can be used by constituents. These can be found by calling Parliament, or on Parliament’s website. Lots of MPs also have websites that will give more information on the work they are doing.

Your MP’s role is to examine national policy issues, hold the Government to account, and represent their constituents’ views in Parliament. Many local matters, such as planning and refuse collection, are dealt with by your local council, and your MP will not be able to have very much influence. However, if your MP can help you, they might:

➜ Speak in a debate about an issue you have raised
➜ Ask a member of the Government about the issue
➜ Put forward an amendment to a piece of legislation
➜ Introduce a bill to change the law
➜ Submit a petition on your behalf
➜ Suggest that a committee inquiry is held on the subject
➜ Sign an Early Day Motion (an internal parliamentary petition)
➜ Refer you on to another organisation or relevant person
➜ Advise you that no further action can be taken

Contribute to the work of select committees

Select committees hold inquiries into different aspects of government policy. They welcome public input into inquiries or issues that they are dealing with. This is best done in writing or
by email. Almost all committees are open to the public, so if you visit Parliament you can see them in action.

**Respond to a consultation document (a Green Paper)**
Government departments issue lots of consultation documents which outline proposed laws that they are thinking of introducing. These are excellent opportunities for you to contribute directly to the decision-making process. Consultation documents are posted on government department websites.

**Submit a petition**
You can ask your MP to submit a petition on your behalf. They are then allowed to make a short speech to Parliament highlighting the issue you have raised.

**Vote in a General Election**
With a few exceptions, everyone over the age of 18 can vote in elections. You have to make sure you are registered to vote, which can usually be done by contacting your local council. To find out more go to www.electoralcommission.org.uk. Voting is your right, and allows you to help choose who runs the country.

**Stand as a candidate for election**
If you are over 21 and are interested in getting really involved in how the country is run, you can stand for election as an MP. This is usually done by joining a political party, but some people have been successful standing as independent candidates.
All members of the public can visit the Houses of Parliament in London, to watch debates or committees, or to meet their MP.

If you want to watch a debate in the main chamber of the House of Commons there is a viewing gallery for members of the public.

To attend a debate, you can:

→ Ask your MP to book tickets for you. All MPs are allocated a small number of tickets every month which they can give to constituents, although you may need to be flexible about the date you attend; or

→ Join the public queue outside St Stephen’s Entrance. Every day, tickets for the public gallery are available on a first-come-first-served basis.

You can also watch debates in the House of Lords or in the smaller Westminster Hall debating chamber. These can both be reached by entering via St Stephen’s Entrance. You do not usually need to book or queue up outside the Houses of Parliament to watch these debates.

Committee meetings in both Houses are also usually open to the public and do not require booking in advance. These are either held in the Committee Corridor in the Houses of Parliament, or in Portcullis House above Westminster Tube Station.

Members of the public can also book tours of the Houses of Parliament by contacting their MP.

Parliament announces its business for the week ahead on a Thursday. Details can be found on the Parliament website or by calling the House of Commons or House of Lords information offices. The full business of Parliament is laid out in the Weekly Information Bulletin.

For more information on visiting Parliament, click on ‘Visiting Parliament’ on the Parliament website, www.parliament.uk, or call your local MP’s office. Visitors with disabilities can find out more about the facilities available by contacting the Serjeant at Arms’ Office on 020 7219 3070.
Some explanations

Act
A law passed by Parliament

Bill
A draft Act of Parliament that is debated by both Houses of Parliament.

Cabinet
The team of MPs and peers chosen by the Prime Minister to head the Government Departments.

Constituency
A geographical area of the country represented by an MP. The population of this area are known as constituents. There are currently 659 constituencies in the UK.

Consultation document (a Green Paper)
Outline of a new policy put out by a Government Department. Members of the public and experts are invited to give their views.

Debate
A discussion that takes place between MPs or peers which, in the House of Commons, often ends in a vote.

Government
Headed by the Prime Minister, the Government chooses which laws will be looked at by Parliament, and makes decisions on policies.

Hansard
The official transcript of Parliament which is published daily and put on the parliamentary website.

House of Commons
The Lower House of the UK legislature, made up of elected Members of Parliament. This House is considered the more powerful of the two Houses.

House of Lords
The Upper House of the legislature, made up of unelected members.

Member of Parliament (MP)
An elected representative who sits in the House of Commons. There are currently 659 MPs, each representing one constituency.

Minister
MPs or peers who are given extra jobs leading or assisting in one of the Government Departments. Most Departments have several ministers, led by a Secretary of State who sits in the Cabinet.

Opposition
The second largest political party in Parliament forms the official Opposition. All parties other than the Government are considered the Opposition.

Peer
A member of the House of Lords.

Political party
A group of people who believe in a similar set of beliefs and try to lead the country by selecting candidates to stand for election.

Prime Minister
The Prime Minister is the leader of the political party that wins most seats in a General Election. He or she is chosen by the party, and not the electorate.

Prime Minister's Question Time
Every Wednesday at 12 noon the Prime Minister answers questions from MPs about the work of the Government.

Speaker of the House of Commons
The Speaker chairs debates in the main Commons chamber, selects members to speak and maintains order.

Surgery
A time allocated by MPs for their constituents to air views and grievances. Surgeries are usually held on a Friday or Saturday in the MP’s constituency.

Whips
MPs and peers who coordinate the timetabling of business through Parliament, and who try to ensure that backbench members of their party vote with the leadership.

White Paper
A statement of Government policy that may precede a bill. There may also have been an earlier consultation document (Green Paper) on the same subject.
1 Contact the House of Commons or House of Lords information offices
The Information Service staff are very helpful, and can answer questions on the business, membership or history of Parliament. They can be called on 020 7219 4272 (Commons) or 020 7219 3107 (Lords).

The Weekly Information Bulletin outlines the upcoming work of Parliament, including debates and committee meetings for both Houses of Parliament. It is available on subscription as a booklet or free via the Parliament website.

2 Look at the Parliament website www.parliament.uk
There is a huge amount of information on the Parliament website. Useful sections include:
  ➜ What’s On: lists business for the day and the week ahead
  ➜ Hansard: daily record of what is said in Parliament
  ➜ Committees: details of committee meetings and reports.

Parliament also has a website, Explore Parliament, especially for young people and teachers: www.explore.parliament.uk.

3 Visit Parliament
You can visit Parliament either to do a tour or to watch debates or committee meetings. There is disabled access, but it is advisable to call Parliament first.

4 Watch debates and committee meetings live on the internet at www.parliamentlive.tv or on digital or satellite television
If you cannot come to Parliament in person, you can watch proceedings on the internet, or on digital or satellite television.
Other useful websites

As well as Parliament’s own website, there are a number of other websites that are useful if you are looking for ways to find out about the work of Westminster and the way the country is run.

www.ukonline.gov.uk
A great first point-of-call to find out about any ‘official’ information, and has a wealth of facts and advice on a huge variety of subjects, including justice and rights, health, and the environment. It can also point you in the right direction on issues such as claiming benefits, getting onto the electoral register, or even learning to drive.

www.epolitix.co.uk
An informative site that uses clear language to explain what is taking place in Parliament. Key features include:

➜ Daily news headlines, articles and press reviews
➜ A monitor of all legislation passing through Parliament
➜ A database of MPs’ websites

www.bbc.co.uk
Contains an up-to-date politics section. The key features include:

➜ Up to the minute news stories from around the world
➜ Clips of parliament in progress such as Prime Minister’s Question Time
➜ In-depth briefs and guides to issues such as the Euro
➜ An A-Z glossary of parliamentary terms

www.parliamentlive.tv
Allows for online viewing of live parliamentary action. Debates from both Houses, Westminster Hall, and Select Committees are broadcast as video or audio, and the day’s schedule is published on the site each weekday morning at 9am. Archive recordings of proceedings are available for the previous two weeks.

The Hansard Society is an independent non-partisan organisation that aims to improve the quality of democracy in the United Kingdom. Our work covers a wide spectrum of issues relating to parliamentary reform and citizenship education for people of all ages, and pioneering the use of new technologies to stimulate democratic engagement.

Hansard Society
9 Kingsway
London WC2B 6XF
Phone 020 7395 4000
hansard@hansard.lse.ac.uk
www.hansardsociety.org.uk

Many thanks to Getty Images who generously provided free access to a number of the photographs used in this booklet including the front cover image.

Further credits:
Page 6: SMG
Page 12: Deryc Sands
Page 27: Stephen Fox
For more information about Parliament, you can visit the website on www.parliament.uk or contact the Information Offices.

House of Commons Information Office
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA
Phone 020 7219 4272
Callers with a text phone can call through Typetalk direct dial: 08001 020 7219 4272
Email hcinfo@parliament.uk

House of Lords Information Office
House of Lords
London SW1A 0PW
Phone 020 7219 3107
Email hlinfo@parliament.uk

For educational materials, you can contact the Education Unit.

The Parliamentary Education Unit
Norman Shaw Building (North)
London SW1A 2TT
Phone 020 7219 2105
Email edunit@parliament.uk

To find out who your MP is, either call the Information Office or type your postcode into the ‘constituency locata’ on the Parliament website (www.locata.co.uk/commons).

To speak to your MP’s office, call the Parliament switchboard on 020 7219 3000 who will put you through.