



HOUSE OF COMMONS

PARLIAMENT 2017

Guide for Select Committee Members

June 2017

Guide for Select Committee Members

Foreword

For centuries, the House of Commons has used select committees as a highly flexible and effective way of finding out the facts about what is going on in this country (and abroad). In recent years – particularly since 2010 under their elected Chairs – the profile of select committees has grown, not least due to increasing assertiveness on their part about holding the government to account for, and requiring it to justify, its policies and expenditure. The committees also scrutinise other public (and sometimes private) bodies. Committees have taken on new roles in addition to their traditional forms of inquiry, such as holding pre-appointment hearings for major public appointments, consulting citizens on issues such as Brexit and immigration, and inviting the public to influence the proceedings of not just the committees but also the House. They have also sought to reach beyond Westminster and Whitehall through wider use of social media as well as more traditional forms of interaction. This guide has been produced to set out for individual Members what opportunities are provided by select committees and how Members can make the most of them.

Committees are served by permanent staff employed directly by the House, who are entirely politically impartial. Their job is to work with the Chair and each member of a select committee to make it as effective as possible in fulfilling its remit as delegated by the House, and to seek creative ways of increasing the impact obtained from the available resources. Select committees have been increasingly effective at harnessing outside experts and research bodies to this task – and multiplying their resources in this way is a key role for the staff.

The staff who serve committees are almost all employed in the Committee Office, located in 14 Tothill Street. I am responsible for ensuring that the provision of committee resources meets the needs of their Chairs and members as effectively and efficiently as can be achieved within the budget allocated to this work by the House, and together with the senior management team of the Committee Office, for ensuring the quality of the service we provide. I am available to provide advice and guidance to any Chair or member of a select committee. My contact details, and those of my senior management team, are listed at the back of this guide.

I look forward to working with you.

Paul Evans

Clerk of Committees

June 2017

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Introduction

The House appoints committees to do work not easily conducted 'in plenary'. Legislative committees (such as public bill committees), for instance, operating under similar rules as the House, increase the time and attention that can be paid to bills and statutory instruments. Select committees do the same for the scrutiny of government policy and expenditure, but they also bring various tools and processes to bear that are not available under the more formal requirements of debate and procedure followed in the House or legislative committees.

The best-known committees are those set up to scrutinise each government department (the 'departmentally-related' select committees) and the Public Accounts Committee (which looks at past public spending). But the range of select committee activity is wider, with committees also scrutinising: EU policy; human rights; science and technology; and the impact of government policy and action on the environment and sustainable development. As well as outward-facing committees, there are internally-focussed select committees such as those that allocate time in the Chamber and Westminster Hall to backbenchers and some that consider the procedures and administration of the House itself, seeking to maintain the institution as an effective and efficient body within a 21st century Parliament.

Depending on their precise terms of reference, select committees can take evidence in public from a range of witnesses, including Ministers, representative organisations, and individuals. They otherwise meet in private, proceeding informally by discussion rather than debate, to decide strategy and tactics, arrange inquiries and other initiatives, consider the evidence they receive and agree reports making recommendations to government on its expenditure, administration and policy. Many committees visit locations in the UK and/or overseas and hold formal or informal meetings in such settings. They can also use new information technologies, as well as cooperate and coordinate with other organisations, in maximising the effectiveness and impact of their work.

Committee Chairs and Members

Chairing a committee

Elected chairs

Since 2010, most select committee Chairs have been elected by the whole House. This change from the traditional arrangement (where the chair was elected by the committee itself from amongst the members of the committee appointed by the House) was intended to help augment the authority and accountability of Chairs.

Shortly after a general election, the Speaker informs political parties how many Chairs of committees each is entitled to, on the basis of party proportions in the House. The parties consult before a motion is put to the House allocating particular Chairs to particular parties. So, for example, in the 2015 Parliament, the Committees on Transport, International Development, Work and Pensions, Home Affairs, and Communities and Local Government were allocated to Labour while the Committees on Scottish Affairs and Energy and Climate Change went to the Scottish National Party.

Fourteen days (or thereabouts) after the House has agreed which chair will be filled from which party, elections for chairs will be held. Members from the relevant party may put forward their names, but must be supported by 15 nominations from their own party, or nominations from 10 per cent of all the Members elected to the House for their party, whichever is fewer. Members may run for election to only one Chair in any election. Multi-candidate contests may go to several rounds of voting, with the lowest-polling candidate eliminated at each stage.

For a small number of committees the rules still provide for the previous practice of electing a Chair from within their membership (usually the first item of business at their first meeting).

Powers and role of the Chair

Chairs do not formally take their positions until their committees are appointed by the House. Chairs, unlike other members of committees, receive an additional salary to reflect the time commitment and additional work required of the role; in May 2017, this stood at £15,235.

Chairs have few formal powers (and only a casting vote if a formal decision is required), but they do have a great deal of influence over how a committee works. Individual styles vary as there is no template for the job (and different committees require different approaches very often). Among the key elements of the role are:

- holding the committee together
- providing support and direction to the committee's staff between formal meetings
- ensuring that members may contribute to the choice of inquiry topics, to questioning sessions and to final reports, and
- providing the committee's public face.

Chairs may also spend a good deal of time working behind the scenes – for example, maintaining good relationships with Ministers in the department the committee scrutinises, or meeting organisations eager to attract the committee's attention or promote a subject for inquiry.

Most committees delegate specified routine decisions to the Chair – timing of meetings, for example, and the details of the organisation of evidence sessions. The reporting of material to the House for publication during non-sitting periods may also be delegated. Chairs also usually take formal responsibility for proposing the draft report discussed by a committee at the end of an inquiry.

Tenure of Chair

The current maximum term of office for a Chair is two full Parliaments or eight years, whichever is the longer. This rule is likely to be examined by the Procedure Committee in the 2017 Parliament.

Committee members

Election and appointment

The House appoints members of its select committees. The number of places each party obtains on any committee depends on the proportion of seats it holds in the whole House. Individual parties put forward names to the Committee of Selection for appointment to their places after holding their own internal elections (by secret ballot), if necessary. The Committee of Selection sees its role as largely a neutral manager of the nominations made by the parties. Party whips will issue details of those elections to their own party members.

Early in a new Parliament, and after Chairs have been elected, motions will be put before the House by the Committee of Selection listing the names of those nominated to serve on new committees. Members are appointed for the whole Parliament, but in practice the membership of a committee changes fairly regularly. For example, committee members who become Ministers will be replaced on the committee, while other members may seek to be discharged for a variety of reasons. Formally, a Member remains a member of a committee until an order discharging them has been agreed by the House (and frequently no such order is agreed until a replacement has been proposed by the party in question).

What committees do

Nearly 40 Commons select committees existed when Parliament was dissolved in May 2017, with more than 370 places to be filled on them. For Members, then, a wide range of opportunities present themselves.

Most committees meet at least once a week (often more frequently) when the House is sitting and they will on average produce ten or more reports a year based on calls for written evidence from any interested party and oral evidence from witnesses they invite to meet the committee. Committees may also visit other parts of the UK or (subject to the approval of the Liaison Committee) go abroad to gather information or evidence.

Members of the committees choose which subjects to investigate, and inquiries may range from simple one-off evidence sessions on

a topical or contained subject to multiple evidence session inquiries running over several months. Committees may also be asked by the House to scrutinise draft legislation (or choose to examine Bills) and are expected to examine departmental spending plans and annual accounts and the major spending of executive bodies funded by the department.

The bulk of committee work is built around inquiries into particular topics – an area of policy, scrutiny of a draft Bill, or a response to some event. Oral and written evidence is gathered and a report produced containing recommendations for the Government, and sometimes for other organisations, to consider.

Time commitment

The effectiveness of any committee depends on its members' engagement with its work. This, in turn, depends on members' ability to devote sufficient time to the work and to set a work programme which is realistically achievable with the precious and scarce resource of political attention available. Members need to make time both for meetings themselves and for adequately preparing for evidence sessions or agreeing reports, both of which may involve absorbing a lot of information.

Members of committees need to set aside time for at least one weekly meeting of probably two to three hours. They will also require much reading time: a substantial number of documents will be circulated by committee staff in the form of, among other things:

- written evidence submissions
- oral evidence transcripts
- briefs containing suggested questions
- correspondence from Ministers and others
- draft committee Reports (and proposed amendments to them); and
- government responses to those Reports.

Calculating the time required each week is difficult as committees' work programmes ebb and flow, but a minimum commitment of the equivalent of a normal working day each week is not unusual

Many members find the work rewarding. Committees have an impact on government policy: the most detailed academic work done on committee effectiveness suggests that more than 40 per cent of committee recommendations are acted on by government. There is the further benefit in the public recognition of the work of committees and the influence that this can bring to their members.

Committee resources

Committee staff

Each committee has a small staff, designed to be an agile team able to source and analyse evidence on the committee's current priorities, advise the Chair and committee and manage the process of its inquiries. Staff are encouraged to work across committee teams and with appropriate specialist staff in the Research & Information team (generally referred to as the Library). They are also encouraged to build networks with think tanks, research bodies and academic institutions to try to multiply the knowledge available to the committee. The typical team comprises the Clerk of the Committee, managing a team of four or five others. These can include a second clerk and one or two policy analysts who will manage individual inquiries, and one or two administrative staff who will arrange meetings, send out papers and organise committee visits and witnesses. In essence the role of the staff is to enable the committee's work. Among other things, the staff:

- keep up to date with emerging issues in the committee's sphere of influence
- suggest potential inquiries and their scope and focus
- research and propose potential witnesses (to give both written and oral evidence) once an inquiry subject has been chosen
- organise oral evidence sessions once the committee has chosen witnesses
- provide briefing and suggested questions for those sessions
- manage the process of inquiries
- engage with the expert community and other stakeholders in the area of the committee's remit on its behalf
- engage with the government in the necessary official-level negotiations
- engage with the public and help the committee to do so
- analyse the evidence received

- brief the committee on key issues and emerging findings
- draft reports at the end of each inquiry on the Chair's behalf and under their authority
- draft amendments to those reports for other members of the committee, on request
- support the Chair in his or her role as the public face of the committee
- draft press notices for the Chair and committee, and issue them when reports are published
- maintain the committee's web pages and manage its social media presence, and
- arrange committee visits, receiving of inward delegations and other events.

Although the committee's staff will work most closely with the Chair in arranging meetings and drafting documents, they are employed to work for the committee as a whole and can be called on to help with any work related to a member's role on the committee. For example, they may be able to provide speaking notes for debates in the House or external events on matters within the committee's remit (particularly in relation to current or recent work), or assist in drafting amendments to draft committee reports.

Other committee support staff

The House also employs a team of select committee media officers. Each media officer typically serves four or five committees, and their work includes shaping the committee's overall communications strategy and advising on how to tell the story of a particular inquiry, drafting press notices for inquiry launches or report publications, arranging press conferences and advising the committee on how to maximise the likely media impact of any given inquiry.

Committees may also call for research support from other parts of the House Service. The House of Commons Library Research and Information team contains an expert array of subject specialists who produce regular standard notes and other documents on most areas of government policy. The Committee Office's Scrutiny Unit (research and development centre) consists of specialists with particular expertise in finance and the law. Committees may also commission external research of their own from a relatively small budget. The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) offers regular briefing notes and conferences on science-related topics, and acts as a broker between committees and academic experts in the hard and social sciences.

Most committees may also appoint specialist advisers, managed within the Clerk's team, either for a specific inquiry or to provide general advice across the range of the committee's remit. Such advisers are paid daily rates (from a centrally managed budget) for the job and are often drawn from business, public services, and academia.

Committees can also work with the House's Outreach and Engagement Service to seek to engage the more difficult to reach sections of the public. The Service can assist select committees with public engagement including through debates and forums, facilitating attendance at existing public meetings, facilitated deliberative workshops, networking events to widen the field of people who know about the work of the committee, and online engagement.

The use of these services is something that should be discussed at the launch of an inquiry.

Suggestions and complaints

Committee staff are supervised in 'clusters' of similar committees by Principal Clerks, and they in turn are under the overall oversight of the Clerk of Committees.

Members who have questions, suggestions or concerns about how their committee's staff should talk first to the Clerk of the Committee.

The Principal Clerks in charge of each 'cluster' and the Clerk of Committees are also always ready to discuss matters affecting committee work with any Member. Contact details for the Principal Clerks and Clerk of Committees are at the end of this guide.

Contact details for individual committees and their staff may be found on their web pages, at www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z.

Practicalities

Committee meetings

First meeting

Once a committee is appointed, the Chair (or, where there is no pre-elected Chair, the senior Member) will write to its members with the date, time and place of a first meeting. The agenda for that meeting will include: declarations of members' interests; setting the time and date of regular meetings; and discussion of the committee's working methods, strategy and consequent forward programme.

Declaration of interests

Committee members are required to declare both the interests that they are obliged to record in the **Register of Members' Interests** and any further interests – whether or not financial – which, though not registrable, ought to be declared. Before the first meeting, the clerk of the committee will arrange for each member's entry in the Register of Members' Interests to be circulated, and write to the committee's members, seeking a list of any pecuniary or non-pecuniary interests which they wish to declare in addition to their registered interests, and that list will then be circulated among papers for the first meeting to all members of the committee. The non-registered interests might include trusteeships of bodies relevant to the committee's remit or trade union membership; close family connections (for example on the Health Committee a close relative who is a medical professional or on the Defence Committee one who is serving in the Armed Forces); and pecuniary interests which, though not declarable under the House's rules for registration are particularly relevant to the committee's remit. At the first meeting, members will also be asked whether they have anything to add or change in the circulated information. The same process will be followed whenever a new member replaces a departing member of the committee.

On some occasions a member may have such a close connection relevant to a particular subject that they feel the need to declare it in respect of a specific inquiry and record it once again in the formal minutes. In rare cases, a member may have so direct a financial interest in a particular inquiry that he or she stands aside from taking part in meetings on that inquiry.

Meeting times and rooms

Most committees choose a regular day and time for their main meeting to fix it in members' diaries. This choice will generally be made at the first meeting of the committee. A committee may identify a further regular time for additional meetings as needed.

Committees generally meet when the House is sitting but can meet, or travel, when it is not (except during Prorogation). They usually try to avoid having a regular meeting slot that makes life difficult for committee members from far-flung constituencies or that clashes with the busiest periods in the House – Question Time, for example, particularly on Wednesdays, or the time when statements may be made. This means that most committee meetings are scheduled on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursday mornings, and pressure on both members' time and available committee rooms can be considerable.

Meetings take place in committee rooms either on the main and upper corridors in the Palace of Westminster or in Portcullis House. Individual committees often have a preference for one or other location or even for particular rooms, but rooms are allocated by ballot, depending on the number of meetings taking place at any time and which committees are being televised (all public sessions are webcast; fewer are televised for transmission on the BBC Parliament channel; other broadcasters may bid for a particular committee to be televised and to have the live feed made available to them). There is also provision for meetings away from Westminster to be recorded for broadcast or posting on the website.

Private and public meetings

The committee's first meeting is likely to be wholly private. Committees most often take evidence in public, but their other deliberations – choosing and designing inquiries, considering reports and so on – are always held in private (so only committee members and House committee staff attend). Committees are forbidden by the House to deliberate in public, and so, when in public session, should only be asking questions of the witnesses – not debating matters between themselves or expounding their own views on the subject under examination. Members should know that public sessions are all webcast and sometimes broadcast, as well as being transcribed from sound recordings and should be aware of when public sessions begin and end (because of the risk of inadvertent broadcast of private discussion).

Committee procedures

Select committee meetings are less formal than debates in the House or in public bill committees. Members remain seated when they speak, and refer to each other by name rather than by constituency. Members sit around a horseshoe-shaped table, but need not sit on 'party sides', as in the Chamber and other (legislative) committees of the House.

The general rule is that a committee quorum is a quarter of the membership, with fractions rounded up. For departmental select committees with a membership of 11, that means a quorum of three. The Chair is counted in the quorum.

Most committee decisions are reached by discussion and without a formal vote. If a formal division is required, the clerk reads out the names of members present, and members respond 'Aye' or 'No'. The Chair votes only in the event of a tie, and may cast that vote as he or she chooses (in contrast to the House and legislative committees, where they are bound by precedent). Formal votes and other formal decisions, in particular those involving expenditure or the exercise of the committee's powers, are always recorded in the committee's 'Formal Minutes', prepared by the Clerk, and published on the website and, where relevant, in committee reports. Note that a decision taken formally, as opposed to a course of action agreed informally, cannot be changed without a further formal decision (after advance notice has

been given of the intention to propose such a change).

Powers

The formal powers of committees to require written and oral evidence are theoretically extensive, but are rarely used. Most requests for information or a witness appearance are met without any need to resort to them. Committees may call for 'persons, papers or records' from anyone except the Government or Members of the Commons or of the Lords.

Committees are also usually permitted by their Order of Reference (found in Standing Orders) to meet when and where they wish, to report (and thereby publish) their evidence, to appoint a sub-committee, and to make reports whenever they choose to. The Committee of Privileges can only inquire into and report on specific matters referred to it by the House.

Committee papers

Documents for each meeting are circulated to members a few days before the meeting to allow time for them to be read and any questions about them raised with the committee's staff. Committees circulate documents electronically, and members are entitled to a tablet device (currently an iPad) on which to receive, read and annotate those documents. Committee staff will seek from members contact details and personal preferences so that the regular circulation can be sent to them or to nominated members of their personal staff.

Privilege, confidentiality and Freedom of Information

Privilege

The public proceedings of a committee are privileged: that is to say that words spoken therein are subject to the same level of protection from legal action or criminal investigation as are words spoken on the floor of the House. The same protection (for slightly different reasons) applies to anything formally published by a committee under an order of the House. This protection applies equally to witnesses. But in all cases the protection is restricted to formal proceedings (including only formal evidence). Words used outside formal meetings (for example in a media interview, even if purporting to represent what was said during proceedings, or at a press conference even if purporting to report what has been said in a report) or things said in letters, emails or other places (for example Twitter) are not subject to so extensive a protection.

Confidentiality

As indicated above, many members will give access to committee documents to a member of their personal staff. Just as discussions within a private meeting must remain private, committee papers are confidential to the committee unless and until a decision is taken to publish them, usually as evidence to an inquiry or as part of a final report.

Members are responsible for ensuring that their own staff respect the confidentiality of any committee documents to which they are given access. As well as the contempt of the House (see below) the practical risk is that confidence among committee members to reach a consensus on controversial issues will be lost if draft committee reports are disclosed before they are due to be published.

Disclosure of a document that has not been formally reported to the House – particularly a draft report, or a report agreed but not yet officially made to the House – is a contempt of the House. Disclosure of draft reports, even to other members of the House, is unacceptable. Where a document is leaked, a committee may investigate the circumstances of that leak and make a special report to the House. Any such report is automatically referred to the Privileges Committee and could lead to action against any member who had prematurely disclosed a report, including suspension from the House.

Freedom of information

The House of Commons, and therefore its committees, is a public authority for the purposes of the Freedom of Information Act. In principle, therefore, committees are obliged to release information they hold when duly requested. However, two of the exemptions provided for in the Act apply particularly to the work of select committees, namely: where release would infringe the privileges of the House (generally taken to include the right of any committee to decide whether, when and how to publish information it holds, including especially information about its private deliberations and material received in connection with its inquiries) or where release would inhibit the effective conduct of public business. Exemptions under these two sections ultimately depend on the Speaker certifying any exemption claimed. There is also an exemption for material intended to be published in the reasonably near future – most material received by a select committee is published. Information of a largely administrative nature (costs of visits for example) is generally not exempt, although there are arrangements made for such information to be published systematically. Individual MPs are not public authorities within the terms of the Act, but Chairs and other committee members clearly acting in their role on behalf of the committee may fall within its terms. If you have any inquiries about the application of the Act in relation to any work on a select committee, it is best to begin by asking the Clerk of your committee for advice.

Inquiries and reports

Launching inquiries

Choosing inquiries

Committees do most of their work via 'inquiries' into particular matters within their remit. The scale of inquiries varies. So long as they remain within the terms given them by the House in their Order of Reference, committees choose their own topics and determine for themselves how they will conduct their inquiries.

Suggestions for inquiry subjects come from many sources, notably from the Chair and committee members themselves, the committee staff, interest groups and members of the public. Most departmental committees will select a range of topics for inquiry or other consideration from time to time, setting a forward programme that still leaves some space for urgent response to changing events, such as the announcement of new policy by the government. For some other committees, the choice of subjects may be determined by external forces: the Public Accounts Committee, for example, considers reports produced for it by the National Audit Office, while the European Scrutiny Committee must examine documents emanating from the EU.

Some inquiries are very short, with perhaps only a single session of oral evidence and a speedy report. Committees may hold one-off evidence sessions without intending to report at all, but to add to public debate or air an issue of immediate or wide concern (the obvious example is the regular evidence sessions with the Prime Minister held by the Liaison Committee). Other inquiries may last several months, involving many evidence sessions. Committees must balance the desirability of hearing from the widest possible range of witnesses with the need to prevent an inquiry from going on so long that it ceases to be topical or is overtaken by policy change or other events. And formal oral evidence is not the only way of getting the information needed – all committees seek written evidence, and most use a variety of informal methods of gathering information.

Terms of reference and the call for evidence

Once a topic has been chosen for inquiry, the committee may agree terms of reference and issue a public call for evidence. At this stage some potential witnesses from whom the committee particularly wants to hear – for example the Government – may also be sent a list of more specific questions and requests for data. The written responses to the general call for evidence may stimulate a committee to ask some witnesses for oral evidence in addition to the obvious candidates.

Response to inquiries varies from a few submissions to more than 100 depending on the inquiry's scope, topicality and the degree to which it engages wide public concern.

Witnesses and oral evidence sessions

Witnesses

The committee will choose which witnesses it wishes to give public oral evidence. Some may be identified by the committee before the call for evidence is issued. Oral evidence sessions will then be held, in public (and invariably webcast), with members of the committee questioning the selected witnesses. Committee staff will prepare a background briefing paper for each oral evidence session, sometimes including a number of suggested questions. But members can and do also ask questions based on their own knowledge, experience and research. Committees, and Chairs, differ in how they organise which member asks which question or set of questions, and it is for the committee as a whole to decide its working methods. It is possible to get stuck in a rut in the approach to gathering evidence or the way of structuring a public session – members should share with staff of the committee any suggestions for innovation or change. Most committees find it useful to reflect together from time to time on how they approach their task and how it might be done differently.

Questioning witnesses

Questioning at oral evidence sessions is intended to draw evidence from the selected witnesses, rather than being a means for members to make statements or outline their own views (which will be reflected when the committee reports at the end of the inquiry). The House

makes training available in questioning techniques for committees which wish to use it, and at an early meeting the committee's staff will highlight the types of training available.

The Liaison Committee encourages committees to treat all witnesses with respect and courtesy and the Chair is expected to protect witnesses from inappropriate aggression.

Reports

The main 'power' of a select committee is the power to publish its opinion of the evidence that it has gathered, analysed, compared and contrasted.

Reports and recommendations

Most inquiries result in a report to the House, containing recommendations to the relevant government department, the wider government, and sometimes other organisations such as arms-length agencies or regulators. Once the oral evidence is concluded, the Chair is responsible for producing a draft report for the whole committee to consider. This will usually be done after one or more 'heads of report' discussions, when a proposed structure for the report and outlines of the narrative and recommendations will be put before the committee for discussion and agreement. This stage (the 'heads of report') is a vital element in enabling the staff who will draft the report to gather the political input which will enable them to make a good stab at expressing the opinion of the committee.

Considering and amending reports

Once a draft report is ready, members will be sent a copy ahead of a meeting to consider it, and will be given time to read it and to propose amendments. It is helpful if members can, if time allows, provide written amendments in advance of the consideration meeting so that proposed changes can be circulated to the whole committee and discussion be clear. The committee staff are always able to help draft suitable amendments and discuss what changes any member of the committee may wish to make. This helps enable the committee to come to conclusions and recommendations on which they can all agree.

Draft reports are presented to the committee by the Chair (although it is possible for alternative drafts to be put forward by other members,

this is rare). At a meeting to consider a report, the Chair will generally seek to hold an informal discussion to see whether any differences can be ironed out consensually. The Chair may then move on to informal consideration of each paragraph or section of the report to clarify decisions on any changes. When agreement cannot be reached informally (or where there is a desire formally to record a minority opinion) the Chair may then take the committee formally through paragraph by paragraph consideration, including the proposing of formal amendments and the making of formal decisions on these. If consensus has been reached informally, the Chair will still need to put a set of formal questions so that the report, as amended if need be, is agreed and made to the House as a whole. If the text has in practice been agreed consensually, the formal process can be very quick. Conversely, if the text is both heavily contested and members wish the differences of opinion to be on the record, then not only the informal consideration but also the formal consideration can stretch over more than one meeting. In practice committees generally try to proceed by consensus, and divisions are relatively rare.

The House's committees produce around 300 to 400 reports, or more, each parliamentary session, and the vast majority are agreed without formal divisions, with conclusions and recommendations backed by the whole committee. This is generally perceived to be one of the strengths of the system, not least because the media (and indeed the government) will often exploit recorded differences of opinion.

Publication of reports

Press releases

Once a report is agreed, a publication date will be set and a press release prepared to accompany the report. Most committees delegate this to the Chair in most circumstances; some may wish to sign off collectively. Reports, and any substantive press releases, are usually sent to:

- the media, to let them prepare stories or broadcasts
- witnesses, to let them prepare their own media or other responses

under embargo, up to three days ahead of publication.

Press conferences and wider media coverage

The Chair, and sometimes other members, of the committee, may be invited to give interviews to print and broadcast media on a report. The committee's media officers are responsible for organising this, and the committee's staff may provide speaking notes or bullet points in addition to the press notice and the report itself, if required. Committees may also very occasionally hold press conferences on a report, usually a day or two before publication and under embargo.

Government responses

Reply within two months

The Government has formally committed itself to replying to the recommendations contained within each select committee report within two months of publication. The deadline is not always met, although there may be good reasons for that, such as the need to clarify information or obtain more information. Clearance procedures within government departments are also often cited as reasons for delay, although committees may consider that an insufficient excuse for missing a deadline the Government has itself set.

Publication and follow-up

Responses tend to concentrate on the conclusions drawn, and recommendations made, within reports rather than on the more general narrative or argument. Unless the department publishes the response itself, the committee may publish it as a special report. Committees may also choose not to publish or to seek a further response if they are not satisfied. After publication, committees have found it effective, in increasing the impact of their work, from time to time to check progress made by government on implementing actions agreed in their response.

Core tasks

The Liaison Committee

The Liaison Committee (see below) has from time to time sought to define the core tasks of committees (in particular the departmentally-related committees) so that they can be held to account for their performance against some recognised standards. The current core tasks were approved by the House on 31 January 2013, with the overall aim of holding “Ministers and Departments to account for their policy and decision-making and to support the House in its control of the supply of public money and scrutiny of legislation.”

The core tasks are:

Strategy

Task 1: To examine the strategy of the department, how it has identified its key objectives and priorities and whether it has the means to achieve them, in terms of plans, resources, skills, capabilities and management information

Policy

Task 2: To examine policy proposals by the department, and areas of emerging policy, or where existing policy is deficient, and make proposals

Expenditure and performance

Task 3: To examine the expenditure plans, outturn and performance of the department and its arm’s length bodies, and the relationships between spending and delivery of outcomes

Draft bills

Task 4: To conduct scrutiny of draft bills within the committee’s responsibilities

Bills and delegated legislation

Task 5: To assist the House in its consideration of bills and statutory instruments, including draft orders under the Public Bodies Act

Post-legislative scrutiny

Task 6: To examine the implementation of legislation and scrutinise the department's post-legislative assessments

European scrutiny

Task 7: To scrutinise policy developments at the European level and EU legislative proposals

Public appointments

Task 8: To scrutinise major appointments made by the department and to hold pre-appointment hearings where appropriate

Support for the house

Task 9: To produce timely reports to inform debate in the House, including Westminster Hall, or debating committees, and to examine petitions tabled

Public engagement

Task 10: To assist the House of Commons in better engaging with the public by ensuring that the work of the committee is accessible to the public

List of select committees

Departmental committees

Departmental committees are tasked with examining the expenditure, policy and administration of individual government departments.

Membership is usually 11, although some, such as the Exiting the European Union Committee, have more. At 3 May 2017, the Committees scrutinising specific government departments or offices were:

1. Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
2. Communities and Local Government
3. Culture, Media and Sport
4. Defence
5. Education
6. Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
7. Exiting the European Union
8. Foreign and Commonwealth Office
9. Health
10. Home Affairs
11. International Development
12. International Trade
13. Justice
14. Northern Ireland Affairs
15. Science and Technology
16. Scottish Affairs
17. Transport
18. Treasury
19. Welsh Affairs
20. Women and Equalities
21. Work and Pensions

Cross-cutting committees

Other committees have more broadly defined subjects to consider, ranging across some or all areas of public policy.

The Public Accounts Committee, which has existed since the mid-19th century, may consider any public expenditure for propriety, efficiency, economy and effectiveness (but is not supposed to examine policy), and produces 50 or more reports each year. Like all committees, it has a small staff of its own, but it also has the assistance of the National Audit Office.

The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee also covers a wide range of public policy matters, including examining reports made by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and the Health Service Commissioner for England (the Ombudsman).

The Environmental Audit Committee monitors the contribution government departments and agencies make to environmental protection and sustainable development.

The European Scrutiny Committee assesses the political and legal importance of EU documents, deciding which should be debated in general European Committees or in the House.

The Regulatory Reform Committee considers proposals to make Legislative Reform Orders.

There are also Joint Committees, which are composed of Members of both Houses. The three significant Joint Committees which have a permanent existence are:

- the Joint Committee on Human Rights, which considers matters relating to human rights in the UK (and has set itself the task of examining most Government Bills for compliance with human rights standards)
- the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, which scrutinises the Government's National Security Strategy, and
- the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments, which considers all proposals for delegated legislation laid before Parliament by Ministers for its compliance with certain tests set out in its order of reference.

Joint Committees are also appointed occasionally ad hoc, in particular to examine draft bills (so called “pre-legislative scrutiny”).

Setting House business

Government business takes precedence for the vast majority of the time available in the Chamber. However, the Backbench Business Committee, the Petitions Committee (and the Liaison Committee) are responsible for allocating certain periods of time for debate on the floor of the House, and/or in Westminster Hall, of matters raised by backbenchers, other committees and e-petitioners.

Internal and operational matters

The House also appoints some committees concerned with its own internal workings. The Procedure Committee looks at how the public business of the House is conducted (questions, legislation, debate and so forth) and considers the rules governing its proceedings. It has set itself the task of monitoring the timeliness and quality of written ministerial answers to parliamentary questions on a systematic basis. The Administration Committee and the Finance Committee advise the House of Commons Commission on what the House Service provides and spends.

Committees on conduct and privilege

Finally, the two committees on Standards and of Privileges deal with matters relating to Members’ conduct, on the one hand, and the conduct of individuals, organisations and, occasionally, the courts, in relation to the rights and responsibilities of the House as a whole on the other. Uniquely, the Committee on Standards has “lay members” who are not MPs.

The Liaison Committee

The House of Commons Liaison Committee is composed of the chairs of each of the select committees. The Committee's remit is to consider general matters relating to the work of select committees. One strand of this work is agreeing guidelines for various operational matters, such as overseas visits (a duty delegated to it by the House of Commons Commission). Another strand is looking at committee effectiveness, and this has included for example the definition of the core tasks for committees described above. It also takes oral evidence from the Prime Minister three or four times a year, but does not conduct inquiries of its own except in relation to the effectiveness of select committees. In the last Parliament it also took evidence from Sir John Chilcot on his report on the decision to go to war in Iraq in 2003, because this engaged the remit of several different committees.

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