

WHAT IS ...

# the House of Commons?

The House of Commons is where Members of Parliament (MPs) meet. There are 650 MPs and they are elected by us, the people. Each MP represents a different part of the country, called a constituency. A constituency can be a town, part of a large city or a large rural area. To make it fair, constituencies are designed to have about the same number of people in each one, so that MPs each represent around the same number of people.

As mentioned previously, the House of Commons was created after Parliament was split into two parts or 'houses', one for the 'commoners' and one for the lords. Over the centuries the House of Commons gradually grew in size and power.

## Did you know?

The House of Commons only has enough seats for 427 MPs, so when all the MPs are in the Chamber, many have to stand!

### IT'S A FACT: MPs

- the leader of the party with the most MPs usually becomes the Prime Minister after a general election
- MPs represent all the people in their constituency, even the ones who voted for a different candidate
- the Prime Minister chooses the other members of the Government
- the Government makes decisions about new laws and about how the country should be run

## Who are MPs?

The UK is divided into 650 areas called constituencies. In a general election, people over 18 years old, who are on the electoral register, can vote for the candidate they want to be their MP. The candidate who gets the most votes becomes the MP for that area until the next election. Most candidates represent a political party.

General elections usually take place every five years, although the Government can decide to hold an early election if they feel it is necessary, and as long as two-thirds of MPs agree.

Before an election, parties publish a manifesto to let voters know what they stand for.

The MPs who support the Government sit on one side of the Commons Chamber. The other MPs, the Opposition, sit on the other side. Debates in the House of Commons can become very heated. During debates the Speaker keeps order and calls MPs to speak. The Speaker has full authority to make sure MPs follow the rules of the House during debates and treat each other politely!



Here are a few of the many and **varied topics** that MPs have debated:

- \* the amount of money that should be spent on education and the health service
- \* whether the voting age should be lowered
- \* whether we should send soldiers to fight in a foreign country
- \* the UK's relationship with the European Union
- \* how child refugees should be looked after if they arrive in the UK without their parents



## What do MPs do?

MPs are elected by the voters in their constituency, to represent their interests and concerns in the House of Commons. MPs raise issues affecting their constituents by making speeches, questioning government ministers, or by openly supporting and highlighting particular campaigns which their constituents feel strongly about.

An MP's biggest job is to challenge the policies of the Government by taking part in debates in the House of Commons. They also vote on new laws and keep track of the work of the Government to make sure their plans are fair and sensible.

MPs have to know a lot about the topics they debate. They often keep in contact with their constituents, so they understand their needs and concerns. That means they are in a good position to act as the voice of their constituents in Parliament.



When the Government proposes a new law, MPs discuss and challenge it, and may suggest that some amendments (changes) are made. Finally, MPs vote on the law: either 'Aye' (yes) or 'No'. If most of the MPs vote 'Aye' then the law is passed to the House of Lords for further debate.

MPs don't spend all their time in Parliament. They also spend a lot of time in their constituencies, staying in touch with the people who live there, listening to their concerns and helping to solve their problems where possible.

## What can your MP do for you?

MPs often hold 'surgeries' in their constituency, where local people can go along to discuss any matters that concern them. MPs help their constituents in a variety of ways. For example, they can:

- make enquiries to help their constituents by talking to ministers
- ask the Government questions about a particular issue
- raise the issue in the House of Commons
- try to bring about a change in the law

### Quick glossary

**Constituent:** someone who lives in a constituency  
**Minister:** a member of the Government who is in charge of one of the Government's departments, such as the Department for Education, Department of Health, or Ministry of Defence

### Quick glossary

**Candidate:** someone who stands for election as an MP

**Constituency:** an area of the country (e.g. a town) that is represented by an MP

**Government:** politicians, led by the Prime Minister, who run the UK's public services

**Manifesto:** a public declaration of intentions and opinions

**Party:** an organisation with shared views on how the country should be run

**Speaker:** the person who manages debates in the House of Commons

## **Your constituency and your MP**

Answer the following questions in the space provided below:-

1 Find out the name of your MP and the name of your constituency. Go to <https://members.parliament.uk/FindYourMP> and see what they have been doing in and out of Parliament. Are there any particular subjects that they have taken a close interest in?

2 Now make a list of some of the things that you think are important locally, nationally or even internationally. For example, the building of some new houses (local), the voting age (national) or climate change (international).

3 Choose one issue that is most important to you. Make sure that the issue is one that Parliament has some responsibility for.

4 Now write to or email your MP, in the space below explaining the problem, what you think about it, and what you would like them to do. Try to be clear and polite, so that they understand you and take you seriously.