



giving
nature
a home

A beginner's guide to campaigning for nature





Hello

Thanks for taking the first step in campaigning for nature. With your help, we can achieve so much more and really speak up for nature.

We have put together this guide to give you an idea of some of the tools available to campaigners like you. We'll always provide you with details about any issue we ask for your help to campaign on, but in here you'll find information about why your help is important and what you can do, as well as extra tips about campaigning in general. We hope it will be a handy reference to dip in and out of.

This guide covers different types of campaigning techniques, including writing letters, using social and traditional media and even face-to-face lobbying. It's a sad fact that nature needs us more than ever. The RSPB can't be everywhere or campaign on everything, so this guide also looks at how you can start your own campaigns to fight for the wildlife and wild places in your community.

We've also included a glossary to explain all the jargon. We hope this booklet gives you everything you need to get started, but if you have any queries at all, please get in touch – our contact details, and those of our campaigns staff in country offices, are on the last page.

Don't forget, if you write a letter to your MP or newspaper, or go to see an elected representative, we'd love to hear about it. Do let us know how it went, what happened or if you heard back later.

Thanks, good luck and happy campaigning!

RSPB Campaigns Team



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Campaigning is in our DNA

It's how the RSPB first began, and it's what we've been doing, with the help of people like you, since 1889. Back then, a group of ladies started the Society for the Protection of Birds to campaign against the trade in bird plumes for women's hats, a fashion which led to the killing of thousands of egrets, birds of paradise and other species. These ladies succeeded in getting a ban on the import of bird plumes in 1921.

From the very start, we have been determined to fight the battles that really matter on behalf of birds and other wildlife and the places they live. By campaigning for nature, you're joining a dedicated band of people who know that a little time can make a world of difference.

Your voice counts because, as well as being an RSPB supporter and nature-lover, you're a voter and a shopper – your opinions are important to all sorts of people. And if you voice these opinions at key moments you can influence your elected representatives and other decision-makers.



rspb-images.com

Campaigning against the use of bird feathers in ladies' hats, London, 1911.



(shutterstock.com)

Why campaigning counts

You have the power. The RSPB has lots of experience of working with the UK Parliament and the devolved governments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as with the European Parliament, to help protect birds, other wildlife, and the natural world.

Over the years, we've built up a good reputation for our work because of our expertise and evidence-based approach.

But the fact is we can't make large-scale political change happen on our own: large-scale change needs the support of people like you.

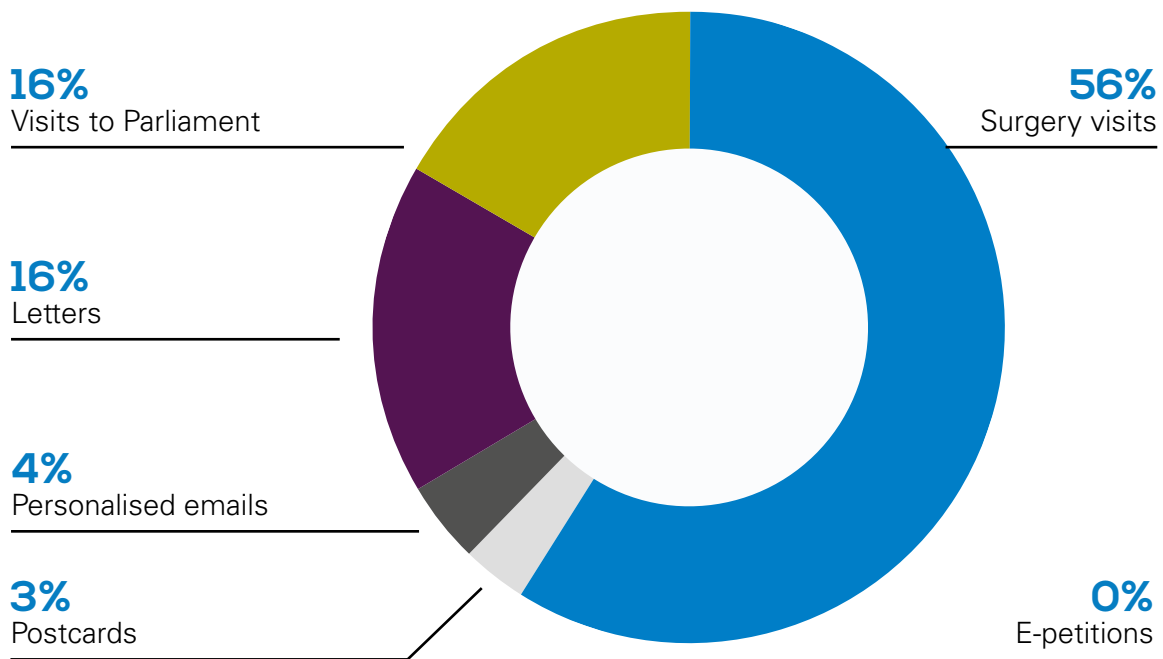
There are many ways that you can try to influence your elected representatives, ranging from something quick like an e-action right the way up to a face-to-face meeting. In this guide, we aim to give you a brief overview of how you can influence the opinions and actions of your elected representatives.

We'll focus on MPs as an example to explain the principles, because everyone in the UK is represented by an MP. The advice also applies to lobbying your national politicians if you live in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, and to your local councillors.

How effective are the different campaign tactics?

There are a number of ways you can try to influence the opinion of your MP. In 2008, to try and find out what works best, the market research company MORI conducted a poll of MPs, asking them to rank which of the methods used by constituents to contact them were the most influential. The results showed that face-to-face lobbying at a constituency surgery was the most effective method.

Campaign tactic effectiveness



As this survey is now several years old, it's likely that things will have changed slightly – for example online campaigning has grown hugely in recent years. However, what won't have changed is the fact that MPs seem to be swayed as much by a personalised letter as they do by being lobbied in Parliament. Therefore, if you can't go and lobby your MP face-to-face about something, then writing them a personal letter may well go a long way towards swaying their opinion.

“MPs seem to be swayed as much by a personalised letter as they do by being lobbied in Parliament.”

Campaigning from home

The good news about campaigning is that it doesn't have to take a lot of time or effort, and you can even do it without leaving home. A prime example of this is e-actions. These are a key feature of modern campaigning and are a way of demonstrating public support for a particular issue.

With social media at our fingertips it's very easy to spread the word and encourage friends and family to take action too, either by forwarding an email or through social media websites.

Alternatively, if you have your own blog, you might consider featuring a campaign. There's a section on social media later in this guide.

Although these types of actions generally feature pre-written messages, you can help yours to stand out by changing the subject line to something more meaningful to you, and adding a paragraph at the

beginning of the message to explain why the issue is so important to you.

Tip: A personal message at the beginning of an email stands out in a busy inbox whereas a message in the last paragraph might get missed!

You can also follow up with other actions, such as tweeting the decision-maker you've just emailed to highlight the issue more publicly.

But if you've got an extra 10 or 15 minutes, it is an inescapable truth that to stand out from the crowd with decision-makers, a hand-written letter sent by post will go much further than an email.



Writing to your MP

It may seem a bit old fashioned, but a well-written letter can speak volumes.

You may be writing to your local councillor, MSP, AM, MLA or even a business, but MPs are the common recipients of letters about any Government decisions which affect the whole of the UK.

MPs are often very busy, and will receive hundreds of letters and emails, including some from campaign organisations and other lobby groups, all trying to get attention for their specific campaign. A good letter from a constituent though, especially a hand-written one, will quite often get more attention.

This is, in part, because it clearly demonstrates that someone cares enough to take the time to write the letter. Also, as they are your elected representative, it is their duty to respond to your views.

If you get a non-committal response (usually they are along the lines of "I appreciate your concerns..."), with no indication about how they feel about the subject or no real answers to your questions, it's always good to follow it up if you can. This is especially crucial, for example, when you are trying to get an MP to vote a certain way or sign an Early Day Motion (EDM) – see the Glossary for more details.

Crafting your message

We know letters from scratch can seem daunting and it can be hard to know where to start, even with some facts at your fingertips. Boost your confidence and build your letter easily by asking yourself these questions:

- Why does this matter to me – what has motivated me to write?
- What is the current situation/proposed situation and why isn't this good enough? (The information we send about our campaigns will help with this.)
- What do I want to see done about it? (For our campaigns, briefings or blogs will highlight what we think should be done.)
- What do I hope my letter will achieve and how would I like the recipient to act as a consequence of my letter?

Once you know the answers to those questions, you'll find you've got the contents of four paragraphs and you're ready to start writing. Here are our top tips to maximise the effectiveness of your letter or email:

1. Make it clear you are a constituent – your letter will be taken more seriously if they know you can influence whether they stay elected or not! The easiest way to do this is by making sure your address is on the letter.
2. Be polite – it may seem obvious, but being polite goes a long way to getting your argument taken seriously. If you are rude, it will only serve to undermine your position.
3. Have a clear "ask" – don't confuse your core message by not asking for something specific or by asking for too many different things at once.
4. Be succinct and try to keep your letter to one side of A4, if possible.
5. If you are writing a campaign letter or email to your MP on behalf of an RSPB campaign, we will usually provide you with a short briefing that outlines the issue and gives some key points that will help you back up your argument.

What can your MP do?

Before you start off campaigning, it's worth bearing in mind what your MP can do if they feel inspired after talking to you. They can:

- write to the minister concerned
- meet the minister – possibly with other MPs
- ask an oral or written question in the House of Commons
- put down an early day motion, which acts like a petition and can be signed by other MPs
- speak on the issue in one of the debates in the House of Commons such as those around a Bill
- talk to your local authority on your behalf.

MSPs in Scotland, AMs in Wales and MLAs in Northern Ireland can take equivalent actions within their respective governments.

You can find out more about some of these terms in the [Glossary](#) section at the end of this guide.

Telephone lobbying

There are occasions that call for lobbying your MP at very short notice. Crucial votes in Parliament tend to be where this is mainly used, but it can also be a useful way of discussing something with your MP (or their staff) if you want to do more than write a letter, but are unable to make a surgery visit.

Some basic tips when calling your MP:

1. Plan what you're going to say – before you pick up the phone, make a few notes of the key things you want to say. This will help stop you getting flustered or forgetting what you want to say.
2. Be prepared to leave a message – it can be off-putting to go straight through to voicemail when you're expecting to get an answer, so make sure you're prepared for both eventualities.
3. Introduce yourself and make it clear you are a constituent – many MPs' offices will get several phone calls a day from NGOs and other lobbyists, so you will be given more time if you distinguish yourself from other callers.
4. Find out who you are speaking to – it generally won't be the MP, so it's good to find out which member of their staff you are talking to in case you need to follow the phone call up.
5. Make your case succinctly – MPs' offices tend to be quite busy, so they or their staff will want to know quickly what it is you would like the MP to do.
6. Have a back-up plan – for example, if you would like the MP to sign an EDM and their staff tell you that they never sign them, then ask if they would be willing to support the motion in principle, or would be willing to take up the issue with a minister on your behalf.
7. Be polite – always thank the MP or researcher and leave any contact details if they have said they will follow up for you.



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You can find out who your elected representative is, and all their contact details (including parliamentary and constituency offices) from the websites below:

For MPs (England):
findyourmp.parliament.uk

MPs are generally in their constituencies from Thursday evening, so it may be worth starting with the constituency office if calling on a Thursday or Friday, as they will be able to get hold of the MP sooner than the Parliamentary staff.

For MSPs (Scotland):
parliament.scot/msps.aspx

For AMs (Wales):
assembly.wales/en/memhome/Pages/memhome.aspx

For MLAs (Northern Ireland):
niassembly.gov.uk/your-mlas/

You can find out who your local councillor is by going straight to your Council website.

Alternatively, you can use this website:
gov.uk/find-your-local-councillors
unless you live in Northern Ireland, in which case start here:
nidirect.gov.uk/services/online-register-local-councillors

You can also find, and write to, any of your elected representatives through:
writetothem.com/

.....

“Make it clear you're a constituent – you will be given more time if you distinguish yourself from being just another caller.”

Face-to-face campaigning

Although this can feel like the most challenging type of direct campaigning, it's also the most effective. If you want to raise an issue in person with your decision-maker, we hope these tips will help you. The principles of face-to-face lobbying are simple, but it can take practice. You may be surprised to find that you already have most of the skills needed to lobby your MP, and he or she will be used to being approached in this way, so there is no reason to get too nervous.

Meeting your MP

The best chance for you to get a meeting with your MP is at one of their constituency surgeries. However, there are no strict rules on when, where and how frequently MPs should hold these – some will have surgeries every week (usually on a Friday or Saturday), while others will hold monthly meetings. The surgeries may take place at their constituency office, or in a public building such as a library. If you live in a larger constituency, your MP may alter where they meet constituents each week, in order to give people from across the constituency a good chance of attending a surgery.

As there are usually a lot of constituents that want to meet with the MP, most will cap each appointment to 10 minutes, meaning you have to be prepared and succinct with your points to get your argument across successfully.

You can find contact details for your MP's constituency office and also the address of their website by visiting findyourmp.parliament.uk. Some MPs like constituents to make an appointment in advance, while others operate a first come, first served basis, so it's always best to call your MP's office first to find out how things work in your area. Why not group together with other constituents or local interest groups? Showing your MP that there are a group of you may be more effective. Also, does the meeting need to be at a surgery? Invite your MP to your favourite green space, for example.

Before the meeting

It's always a good idea to research your MP and the subject you're approaching them about thoroughly. You can find information on their voting record and key interests at theyworkforyou.com.

If you are seeing them as part of an RSPB campaign, we can help you with information on the campaign, such as key facts and figures and the main concerns we have. This will help to back up your argument.

Preparing a very short agenda will help you keep track of what you want to say. As you are likely to only have 5-10 minutes, you will need to keep strictly on track to make sure all your points are made.

The meeting itself

These pointers will help your meeting go as smoothly and successfully as possible:

1. Make an effort – look presentable, be punctual and thank the MP for making the time to meet you.
2. Think about your body language – this will have a big impact on the message that your MP takes away.
3. Keep the meeting organised – if you are in a group, nominate one person to facilitate the meeting, do the introductions and keep the meeting on track.
4. Listen – remember to show that you are open to counter-arguments but beware of politicians who like the sound of their own voice.
5. Take notes – these will be useful to refer back to at a later date.
6. Do not guess – it is better to be honest if you are unable to answer a question. You can always come back with more information afterwards and RSPB staff are happy to answer any questions if you want to come back to us on any points.
7. Humour – used appropriately, humour can be a good way to defuse hostility or scepticism and gain respect. However, it's best to use humour only if you are sure it will be appreciated.
8. Tact and diplomacy – obviously, basic rules of etiquette apply. Always thank the MP again as you leave.

Crucially, make sure you leave having asked the MP to do something, for example:

- To support your campaign objectives.
- To keep in regular contact with you and to give you copies of any responses they receive from ministers about the matter.

Follow up

Depending on what was agreed at the meeting, it's usually a good idea to follow up the issue with your MP. This can be a simple thank you, or even a polite push if your MP has promised to do something such as sign an Early Day Motion, but hasn't. This will help to remind them of the issue and also show that it is something you take seriously.

Using social media

The fascinating thing about social media is just how fluid, dynamic and fast-paced it is. Information is very different online, which means that organisations don't need to rely on traditional media, such as newspapers, TV and radio, to communicate with large numbers of people. In fact, when enough people are talking about an issue across social media, that can make news on traditional media.

Using social media in a personal capacity to help larger campaigns is very straightforward. Simply 're-tweeting' relevant posts on Twitter or sharing RSPB Facebook posts promotes the campaign message to networks far wider than we can achieve on our own, and we'd always encourage you to share campaign blogs and online actions through e-mail, Facebook or Twitter. There are often social media buttons on a campaign page to help you do it quickly.

Many key figures in the environmental sector are keen tweeters, so if you're a particular fan of the site you'll be able to keep up to date with a range of important environmental issues by following lots of different people. You can also follow and contact your MP, MSP, AM, MLA or even some of your local councillors, if they use the site. You can find a helpful list of MPs on twitter at mpsontwitter.co.uk/list

You're most likely already using social media in some way, but just in case you're not, here's a quick definition: social media is the dissemination of information through the internet as people share content with one another. It can take the form of forums, videos and blogs, but primarily relies on networking websites like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Many of you will already be familiar with these platforms, but for those of you new to the concept, here is a quick overview of the most popular ones.



Twitter is a fast-paced social networking site that restricts users to expressing themselves within 140 characters – about the length of an old-fashioned single text message. Users can create personalised Twitter feeds by 'following' other users, which allows you to view only the sorts of information you want to see. In turn, people can 'follow' you to keep track of the messages you post. The site was made famous largely through its celebrity users, such as Stephen Fry, who have amassed millions of followers in some cases. However, it is also enormously useful for campaigning organisations to share information and promote their campaigns more widely than has ever been possible before.

In order to link together and promote other users and issues, 'tweeters' can use different methods to highlight specific phrases or usernames in their tweets. Other users can be alerted to a conversation by placing an @ symbol in front of their username. And tweeters can use a 'hashtag' (#) made up of words or phrases (without spaces or punctuation), such as #RSPB. Clicking on the hashtag then shows tweets from other people talking about the same issue.

With only 140 characters to play with, it can be a struggle to fit in a full URL. Sites such as bitly.com, tinyurl.com, ow.ly or Google's goo.gl help get around this by shortening your chosen link.

Because Twitter is so fast-paced, if you follow a lot of people it may help to view it as a busy pub with lots of interesting conversations – it's great to hear what people are talking about while you're there, but if you worry about trying to hear everything that was said before you arrived it can be rather overwhelming!



Facebook allows users to sign up and create their own profiles to share updates, links and photos, and send messages to their network of friends. Campaigning organisations and news media use the site to promote campaign issues by encouraging people to use the 'like', 'comment' and 'share' functions at the bottom of each posting. The more often a post is liked or shared, then the more it will be seen by people in the extended networks of friends of those who share it. This means the message reaches many more people who might not otherwise have come across the campaign.



YouTube is an online video site where users can upload and view millions of shared videos. While a lot of the stuff you find on YouTube seems to involve cats doing funny things, it can be a powerful platform to promote issues or campaigns. For example, the RSPB has its own YouTube channel where videos of some of our bigger campaigns can be viewed. Nearly all major campaigning NGOs now use YouTube to promote their campaigns and video is a creative and interesting way to engage people in an issue.

Local media

Getting local media coverage for a campaign can be a great way to build real momentum in support of an issue that affects people in your area, especially if you're able to get the local paper or radio station to champion your cause. Like meeting with your MP, if you feel ready to take this step we'd love to hear all about it and how you get on. Most elected representatives avidly watch local media and are keen to keep a good profile for obvious reasons, therefore some local coverage can really help to swing their opinion in a campaign's favour.

If you choose to highlight an issue through local media, make sure you can talk confidently about the campaign. Planning a series of media activities and gaining regular coverage across different types of media will give your campaign prominence, but only if you can convince people to take up the story in the first place. Where possible, it's best to emphasise positive messages, such as what will be saved, rather than focusing on the negatives, such as what will be lost, as knowing that they can make a positive difference appeals much more to people.

And don't forget about social networks such as Twitter or Facebook – they're helpful here too, especially if you have local news stories to link to. It's a simple interactive way to keep your story fresh, but do remember to set time aside to post regular updates.

Newspapers

First off, find out what papers cover your area, including evening, daily or weekend versions and check what type of stories they cover before approaching them – this will help you to use your time more effectively. When you've decided who to approach, you can usually find contact details for journalists or the newsdesk inside each copy of the paper or on their website. In general, there are two main ways to get your campaign published in a newspaper: press releases and letters pages. Using one or both of these effectively can really help to boost the profile of your campaign.

Press release

how to get your story taken up

Press releases can be an excellent way to get your campaign covered in a full story. However, you need to get your points across in very few words – most newsrooms only consider a release for 10 seconds

before it is followed up or binned. Therefore the key is having a compelling first paragraph that grabs the news editor's attention. You should aim to sum up your story in around 30 words and to answer the following questions: who, what, why, where, when?

Bear in mind that any images for publication need to be digital and high resolution, 1MB or more. However, if you're just planning on publishing online, then lower resolution images are fine.



Chris O'Reilly (rspb-images.com)

The following tips will help increase your chances of getting your press release published:

- Create a headline that is eye-catching and describes the story.
- Put the most important point in the first sentence and leave your detail for lower down the page.
- Use a quote that can put across the concerns passionately and from an individual's perspective, but don't use formal language in a quote.
- Remember to include contact details at the end, including a daytime contact or e-mail address and make sure you're available to respond to enquiries.
- Photos often sell a story. Do you have a good photo to accompany the story?
- Be topical and timely. The media often moves quickly on to the next big thing.

Letters pages

Letters pages are one of the most read parts of a local newspaper, and can be the easiest way to get a piece published about your campaign. What's more, a letter can often be published at shorter notice than trying to arrange a full news story.

Read the letters page and pick up the style of the paper to enhance your chances of getting a letter printed. Keep your letter short (150 words maximum) and make your message clear and simple. However, you'll also need to be aware of copy deadlines – you will find these on the letters page of your local paper.

Local radio and TV

Local radio can be an easy way to reach large numbers of people in your area. Again, a direct approach is usually best, with a phone call to whoever controls the radio station's newsdesk, supported by a concise statement of the facts or a press release you can send through too. It's best to e-mail this if you can and follow it up with a phone call.

TV requires good visual images or some activity element to your story, so the more you have to offer the programme, the more likely it is to feature you. It also requires more time and people to compile a report compared with radio or newspapers, so ensure you dedicate enough time to meet producers' requirements.

If you get an interview, here are a few pointers to help you get the most out of it:

- Make sure you are well prepared.
- Check beforehand if the interview is going to be live or pre-recorded.
- Enquire about the questions you are likely to be asked.
- Think about who will be the best person for the interview.
- Rehearse in advance, including preparing your response to any potentially difficult questions.
- Plan your key messages (two or three maximum) and don't allow the interviewer to deflect you from what you want to get across.
- Always assume the microphone is on!
- Keep your hands and papers still during the interview and make sure mobile phones are switched off.

“Local radio can be an easy way to reach large numbers of people in your area.”

Starting your own campaign

You don't have to go it alone. It can be daunting striking out on your own, but it doesn't need to be. If there is a burning issue in your local area, chances are someone else will feel the same as you.

Where to begin

1. Look at the problem you are faced with and think about the outcome or change that you want to achieve.
2. Identify the person and/or process that can make the change or influence the outcome.
3. Have a think about the most effective way to influence that person and/or process. For example, would the best approach involve presenting a petition with lots of names? Or should you focus on getting large numbers of people to object to a planning application? Or would local people writing personal letters about why it matters to them be more effective?
4. Identify your resources: money, time, volunteers, skills and so on.
5. Use this guide to plan your campaign, using the most appropriate tools for the job at hand.

Look online

If you want to campaign online, sites such as [change.org](https://www.change.org) can host your campaign action. They can also be a useful source of information and offer lots more tips on how to campaign successfully.

Effective change

You don't have to do everything at once. Starting small and scaling-up as needed can be an effective use of your time, energy and resources.

Remember, you have the power to affect real change in your local area and are best placed to achieve it.

Good luck!



Glossary

Parliament is full of obscure rules, jargon and acronyms that can make it complicated to understand what MPs are doing and how they go about bringing attention to campaigns. We've pulled together a brief description of some of the key terms you are likely to come across when dealing with MPs.

Law making

Getting a piece of legislation passed by Parliament is a complicated and often archaic process.

Parliamentary Session

Usually a year long and is opened with the Queen's Speech and the formal opening of Parliament. They often vary in length around the time of a General Election. Since 2010, Parliamentary Sessions now start and end in May.

Queen's Speech

Marks the start of a new Parliamentary Session. The Queen's Speech is written by the Government and sets out their legislative agenda for the coming Parliamentary Session.

Pre-Bill process

Before the Government gets to the point where it can put a Bill before Parliament, there is a typical set of stages that it must pass through first:

- 1. Green Paper** – a policy document produced by the Government when it is looking to make a new law. This is often drawn up before a consultation.
- 2. Consultation** – this is when the Government asks for opinions on the proposed policy or legislation from the public and interested groups such as statutory bodies and NGOs.
- 3. White Paper (or sometimes a draft Bill)** – these are 'final drafts' of policy intentions, and often form the basis for a Bill.

Progression of a Bill

Once the Government has decided on the precise policy it would like to turn into legislation, it is then introduced to Parliament as a Bill and can go through the Commons or the Lords, depending on timetabling. In order for the Bill to become law, it must go through the following steps:

- 1. First Reading** – a simple process where the title of the Bill is read aloud in the chamber and thereby formally introduced to Parliament.
- 2. Second Reading** – where the Bill is debated for the first time by MPs or Lords.
- 3. Committee Stage** – the Bill is examined in detail, usually by a committee of MPs or Lords, who can add amendments suggested by other MPs or Lords.
- 4. Report Stage** – the Bill returns to the chamber, where it is again debated and MPs/Lords can ask for further amendments to be made.
- 5. Third Reading** – usually happens straight after the Report Stage and is the final chance for MPs and Lords to make amendments before it moves on to the other house.

6. Moves to the Other House – i.e. the Lords if it started in the Commons or vice versa, where the process of First to Third Readings is repeated.

7. Royal Assent – the Bill passes onto the statute as an Act and becomes law.

This process can go on for some time, particularly on contentious issues such as welfare reform.

Private Member's Bill (PMB)

Allows backbenchers to get a Bill put before Parliament. Often they are on issues that the Government either doesn't agree with, or doesn't want to tackle. They are rarely successful, because of the short amount of time allocated for their debate, and their vulnerability to being 'talked out' by MPs.

There are two types of PMB:

- 1. Ballot Bill** – the type of PMB given the most time in Parliament. Near the start of a Parliamentary session, 20 backbench MPs are drawn in a ballot and given the chance to put a PMB before Parliament. There are then 20 Friday sessions set aside for the Bills to have their readings, meaning MPs closer to the top of the ballot have a much better chance of seeing their Bills progress. However, Governments tend to not like PMBs, and will generally seek to block them unless there is a strong enough level of support amongst MPs.
- 2. Ten Minute Rule** – another way for a Backbencher to introduce a PMB in Parliament. These Bills are given even less time than a Ballot Bill and thus very rarely get passed.

Debates, motions and Parliamentary rules

As well as law making, there are a whole host of other ways that MPs can scrutinise Government activity or call for debates on certain issues.

Early Day Motion (EDM)

A sort of Parliamentary petition, an EDM is tabled to raise issues for debate, although the majority never get discussed by Parliament. MPs can sign an EDM in support, and their main use these days is to highlight the issue – the more MPs who sign, the more important the EDM is seen to be. However, they are not popular with a lot of MPs, and many will refuse to sign for a number of reasons, including their position in government or the cost of producing EDMs.

Parliamentary Question (PQ)

These are how MPs help to hold the Government to account, by questioning ministers on the reasoning and evidence that underpins their policy decisions. There are three main forms of PQ:

1. Prime Minister's Questions – (see below)

2. Oral questions – submitted three days in advance, these are questions asked verbally to a minister during debate in the Chamber. Question Time is usually the first item of the day and the minister is required to attend for their relevant slots to answer any MPs' questions.

3. Written questions – for questions requiring more detailed answers, MPs will submit a written question for ministers to answer. These can take up to a week to be dealt with, but tend to give a more in-depth understanding of the reasoning or progress of a particular piece of policy.

Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs)

The liveliest exchanges in the Commons chamber come during PMQs. As the name suggests, this is the chance for MPs to put questions to the Prime Minister, but it also gives an opportunity for the leader of the Opposition to ask up to six questions of his own, usually to score political points against the Government. Nonetheless, it can be incredibly useful for MPs to bring profile to an issue and attempt to get a response or commitment from the Prime Minister.

Ministerial Code

This is the code of conduct for ministers and sets out how they should behave in accordance with their ministerial responsibilities. This was primarily set up to help combat conflicts of interest and make ministers accountable. However, from a campaigning perspective, it can make working with ministers at a constituency level a little more difficult. This is because ministers are advised to act with particular care when balancing constituency needs with their ministerial duties, which means many will not explicitly support campaigns that are not endorsed by Government. This extends to campaign tools such as EDMs and Private Member's Bills.

MPs' Roles

The Parliamentary roles of MPs can hugely impact on their ability to influence or be influenced.

The Cabinet

Appointed by the Prime Minister, these MPs are the most senior members of the Government. There are typically 21-24 members of the Cabinet and the majority of them will head up a Government department – these ministers are known as Secretaries of State. The Cabinet decides government policy, and makes the important decisions on running the country.

Ministers

MPs assigned to roles in a government department are known as ministers. They will work on a specific portfolio of work and help to direct the policy of their given area. They report to the Secretary of State for their department.

Shadow Government

The Opposition party will allocate some of its own MPs to roles that mirror their Government counterparts. Therefore, for every department and Secretary of State, there will be a shadow representative, who gives the Opposition's views on the same issues.

Parliamentary Private Secretaries (PPSs)

These are MPs who support the work of a minister. While not specifically bound by the same rules as a minister, many PPSs will not sign EDMs or vote against the Whip, for fear of compromising their duties as a PPS. However, they do retain more freedom than a minister to publically pursue issues that interest them, and so may be willing to support campaigns in ways that ministers usually will not.

Whips

Whips are MPs whose responsibility is to keep order among other MPs in their party, and so they are incredibly important figures within Parliament. They send around a weekly bulletin to their MPs with key divisions (votes) underlined one, two or three times based on their importance – a three line whip is the most important as it is punishable by exclusion from the Party if an MP rebels or fails to attend without prior permission.

Backbenchers

MPs without any official role in Government or on the Opposition Front Bench are known as Backbenchers. Just over half of MPs fall into this category – including PPSs, who technically remain on the backbenches, despite their increased responsibilities. While individual Backbenchers are often less influential than their front bench colleagues, they are far less restricted in what they say and choose to support. This means that campaigns that gain enough momentum of support from Backbenchers can often lead to a change of heart from Government – the 2008 Climate Change Act is a prime example of this.

Commons Speaker

The Commons Speaker is the presiding officer and the MP in charge of keeping order in the House of Commons. While he or she will have been elected as an MP for a specific party, they give up all affiliations when they assume the role of Speaker, and then usually 'retire to the Lords' when they choose to leave the position.

Commons Select Committees

These are elected committees of at least 11 MPs each, who scrutinise the work of each Government department. In addition, there are also cross-departmental committees, such as the Environmental Audit Committee, which can look into issues that cover several departments at once.

Contacts

If you need further information, or would like to talk about any of the information in this guide, please use the following contact details:

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