



COMMUNITIES: Governance in the UK

UK Government

In order for a community to be sustainable, every member of that community should have a voice or say in how it is governed. The UK is a parliamentary democracy, and is divided into areas called constituencies. Some are 'independent' but most are aligned with a political party. The three largest political parties in the UK are Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. Before an election, they make their policies on different areas (e.g. education, health, defence) known to the general public, in the hope that these will influence the people's decision on whom to elect or vote.

A general election is held on a date determined by the Prime Minister (but at least once every five years). Residents in each constituency, aged 18 or over who have been born in the UK or are UK citizens, are eligible to vote for their Member of Parliament (MP). Elections use a 'first past the post' system, so the candidate with the most votes is elected in their constituency.

The MPs form the House of Commons. The governing party is the one with the largest number of constituencies. MPs from parties not in power form the 'opposition'. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own 'devolved' administrations in charge of many of the public services in these countries.

It is the role of the Government to debate and approve policy, which is then carried out by the civil service.

Influencing policy

As well as voting for the politicians they wish to represent them, organisations and members of the public can also influence government policy in other ways:

- **Lobbying** – individuals, pressure groups and organisations try to persuade the Government to form a particular opinion, take action about an issue (e.g. climate change, animal rights) or change its policies. Methods can range from writing letters, sending petitions or getting experts or celebrities to support the cause, to more extreme measures like protests, strikes and 'publicity stunts' that grab the attention of the media. (See **fact sheet 5.2 Communities – Community Action** for more information.)
- **Attending council meetings** – Members of the public can attend and observe meetings of their local council (and also of the National Government) to stay informed about the decisions that are being made in their communities. Minutes from council meetings are also available in local libraries.
- **Running for parliament** – UK citizens aged 18 or over can become a political candidate. If they're elected to become an MP, they try to influence other MPs to support their opinion or goal. Some individuals don't wish to stand for office but join a political party and offer their support.
- **Other influences** - The UK is part of the European Parliament and is influenced by its policy decisions. It's also the role of the monarchy to advise parliament.



Did you know?

The first general election in the United Kingdom was held in 1802.