

The U.K. legislative process

1

Bill starting in the House of Commons or in the House of Lords

A bill is a proposed law introduced to Parliament. Most bills can begin either in the House of Commons or in the House of Lords. The government will make this decision based on the need to make sure each House has a balanced programme of legislation to consider each session. However, certain bills must start in the Commons, such as a bill whose main aim is the imposition of taxation (the annual Finance bill is an example of this). Bills of major constitutional importance also conventionally start in the Commons.

2

First reading

This is a formality and there is no debate on the bill.

3

Second reading

This is a debate on the main principles of the bill, held in the chamber. A government minister will open the debate by setting out the case for the bill and explaining its provisions. The opposition will respond and then other members are free to discuss it. The government will close the debate by responding to the points made. No amendments can be made to the text of the bill at this stage, although members may give an idea of the changes they will be proposing at later stages. At the end of the debate, the House will vote on the bill. If the vote is lost by the government, the bill cannot proceed any further, though it is rare for a government bill to be defeated at this stage.

4

Report stage

In both Houses this stage takes place in the chamber. Only amendments are discussed. So, if none are tabled this stage of the process will simply be a formality. As in committee, the amendments may change what is in the bill already or may involve new provisions being added. The report stage is also referred to as Consideration in the Commons.

5

Third reading

In the Commons, this is another general discussion of the bill that invariably takes place immediately after Report (or, if the “English Votes for English Laws”¹ procedures apply, immediately after it has been considered by the Legislative Grand Committee as described above). No amendments are possible. In the Lords, Third Reading will take place on a later day, and tidying up amendments can be tabled.

6

Committee stage

This is a line-by-line consideration of the details of the bill. In the Commons, this process may be carried out by a specially convened committee of MPs (a Public Bill Committee) that reflects the strength of the parties in the House as a whole. Alternatively, the Committee Stage may be taken in the chamber (in which case it is called Committee of the Whole House). In the Lords, the committee stage will take place in the chamber or a committee room in the Palace of Westminster; either way, any peer can participate.

A Public Bill Committee in the Commons can take oral and written evidence on the bill. In either House, the committee will decide whether each clause of the bill should remain in it, and will consider any amendments tabled by the government or other members.

¹English votes for English laws (EVEL) was a set of procedures of the House of Commons of the Parliament of the United Kingdom whereby legislation that affected only England required the support of a majority of MPs representing English constituencies. The procedures were in place between 2015 and 2020.

7

Consideration of amendments by both Houses

Each House considers the other's amendments. When a bill has passed through third reading in both Houses, it is returned to the first House (where it started) for any amendments made by the second House to be considered.

If the Commons makes amendments to the bill, the Lords must consider them and either agree or disagree to the amendments or make alternative proposals. If the Lords disagree with any Commons amendments, or makes alternative proposals, then the bill is sent back to the Commons.

A bill may go back and forth between each House until both Houses reach agreement on the exact wording of the bill – this is known as 'ping pong'.

8

Royal Assent and beyond

A bill that has been passed by both Houses becomes law once it has been given Royal Assent and this has been signified to Parliament. It will then become an act. Even then, the act may not have any practical effect until later. Most provisions in an act will either come into operation within a set period after Royal Assent (commonly two months later) or at a time fixed by the government. This gives the government and those people who are directly affected by the act time to plan accordingly. The government may need to fill in some of the details of the new scheme by making regulations or orders under powers contained in the act, for example, to deal with procedural matters.

Three to five years after a bill has been passed, the department responsible for the act resulting from it will normally review how it has worked in practice and submit an assessment of this to the relevant Commons departmental committee. The committee will then decide whether it wants to carry out a fuller post-legislative enquiry into the act.