Chapter 5 - The UK Government, the Law and Your Role

Chapter contents

- The development of British democracy
- The British constitution
- The government
- The UK and international institutions
- Respecting the law
- Fundamental principles
- Your role in the community

The UK is a parliamentary democracy with the monarch as head of state. This section will tell you about the different institutions which make up this democratic system and explain how you can play a part in the democratic process.

The development of British democracy

Democracy is a system of government where the whole adult population gets a say. This might be by direct voting or by choosing representatives to make decisions on their behalf.

At the turn of the 19th century, Britain was not a democracy as we know it today. Although there were elections to select members of Parliament (MPs),
only a small group of people could vote. They were men who were over 21 years of age and who owned a certain amount of property.

The franchise (that is the number of people who had the right to vote) grew over the course of the 19th century and political parties began to involve ordinary men and women as members.

In the 1830s and 1840s, a group called the Chartists campaigned for reform. They wanted six changes:

- for every man to have the vote
- elections every year
- for all regions to be equal in the electoral system
- secret ballots
- for any man to be able to stand as an MP
- for MPs to be paid

At the time, the campaign was generally seen as failure. However, by 1918 most of these reforms had been adopted. The voting franchise was also extended to women over 30, and then in 1928 to men and women over 21. In 1969, the voting age was reduced to 18 for men and women.

The British constitution

A constitution is a set of principles by which a country is governed. It includes all of the institutions that are responsible for running the country and how their power is kept in check. The constitution also includes laws and conventions. The British constitution is not written down in any single document, and therefore it is described as ‘unwritten’. This is mainly because the UK, unlike America or France, has never had a revolution which led permanently to a totally new system of government. Our most important institutions have developed over hundreds of years. Some people believe that there should be a single document, but others believe an unwritten constitution allows for more flexibility and better government.

Constitutional institutions

In the UK, there are several different parts of government. The main ones are:

- the monarchy
- Parliament (the House of Commons and the House of Lords)
• the Prime Minister
• the cabinet
• the judiciary (courts)
• the police
• the civil service
• local government.

In addition, there are devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland that have the power to legislate on certain issues.

**The monarchy**

Queen Elizabeth II is the head of state of the UK. She is also the monarch or head of state for many countries in the Commonwealth. The UK has a constitutional monarchy. This means that the king or queen does not rule the country but appoints the government, which the people have chosen in a democratic election. The monarch invites the leader of the party with the largest number of MPs or the leader of a coalition between more than one party, to become the Prime Minister. The monarch has regular meetings with the Prime Minister and can advise, warn and encourage, but the decisions on government policies are made by the Prime Minister and cabinet (see the section on ‘The government’).

The Queen has reigned since her father’s death in 1952, and in 2012 she celebrated her Diamond Jubilee (60 years as queen). She is married to Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh. Her eldest son, Prince Charles (the Prince of Wales), is the heir to the throne.

The Queen has important ceremonial roles, such as the opening of the new parliamentary session each year. On this occasion the Queen makes a speech which summarises the government’s policies for the year ahead. All Acts of Parliament are made in her name.

The Queen represents the UK to the rest of the world. She receives foreign ambassadors and high commissioners, entertains visiting heads of state, and
makes state visits overseas in support of diplomatic and economic relationships with other counties.

The Queen has an important role in providing stability and continuity. While governments and Prime Ministers change regularly, the Queen continues as head of state. She provides a focus for national identity and pride, which was demonstrated through the celebrations of her Jubilee.

**The National Anthem**

The National Anthem of the UK is ‘God Save the Queen’. It is played at important national occasions and at events attended by the Queen or the Royal Family. The first verse is:

‘God save our gracious Queen!
Long live our noble Queen!
God save the Queen!
Send her victorious,
Happy and glorious,
Long to reign over us,
God save the Queen!’

New citizens swear or affirm loyalty to the Queen as part of the citizenship ceremony.

**Oath of allegiance**

I (name) swear by Almighty God that on becoming a British citizen, I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, her Heirs and Successors, according to law.

**Affirmation of allegiance**

I (name) do solemnly, sincerely and truly declare and affirm that on becoming a British citizen, I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, her Heirs and Successors, according to law.

**System of government**

The system of government in the UK is a parliamentary democracy. The UK is divided into parliamentary constituencies. Voters in each constituency elect their Member of Parliament (MP) in a General Election. All of the elected MPs form the House of Commons. Most MPs belong to a political
party, and the party with the majority of MPs forms the government. If one party does not get a majority, two parties can join together to form a coalition.

The House of Parliament, one of the centres of political life in the UK and a World Heritage Site

**The House of Commons**

The House of Commons is regarded as the more important of the two chambers in Parliament because its members are democratically elected. The Prime Minister and almost all the members of the cabinet are members of the House of Commons (MPs). Each MP represents a parliamentary constituency, which is a small area of the country.

MPs have a number of different responsibilities. They:

- Represent everyone in their constituency
- Help to create new laws
- Scrutinise and comment on what the government is doing
- Debate important national issues

**The House of Lords**

Members of the House of Lords, known as peers, are not elected by the people and do not represent a constituency. The role and membership of the House of Lords has changed over the last 50 years.

This material is based on the "Life in the United Kingdom: A Guide for New Residents – 3rd Edition" handbook and reproduced with the permission of Controller of HMSO under Open Parliament Licence. © Crown copyright. This reproduction is provided solely for the convenience of our users and is for studying purposes. This reproduction is for your sole use only. You may not distribute, republish, display, post or transmit this reproduction.
Until 1958, all peers were:

- ‘hereditary’, which means they inherited their title, or
- senior judges, or
- bishops of the Church of England.

Since 1958, the Prime Minister has had the power to nominate peers just for their own lifetime. These are called life peers. They have usually had an important career in politics, business, law or another profession. Life peers are appointed by the monarch on the advice of the Prime Minister. They also include people nominated by the leaders of the other main political parties or by an independent Appointments Commission for non-party peers.

Since 1999, hereditary peers have lost the automatic right to attend the House of Lords. They now elect a few of their number to represent them in the House of Lords.

The House of Lords is normally more independent of the government than the House of Commons. It can suggest amendments or propose new laws, which are then discussed by MPs. The House of Lords checks laws that have been passed by the House of Commons to ensure they are fit for purpose. It also holds the government to account to make sure that it is working in the best interests of the people. There are peers who are specialists in particular areas, and their knowledge is useful in making and checking laws. The House of Commons has powers to overrule the House of Lords, but these are not used often.

**The Speaker**

Debates in the House of Commons are chaired by the Speaker. This person is the chief officer of the House of Commons. The Speaker is neutral and does not represent a political party, even though he or she is an MP, represents a constituency and deals with the constituents’ problems like any other MP. The Speaker is chosen by other MPs in a secret ballot.

The Speaker keeps order during political debates to make sure the rules are followed. This includes making sure the opposition (see the section on ‘The government’) has a guaranteed amount of time to debate issues which it chooses. The Speaker also represents Parliament on ceremonial occasions.

**Elections**

**UK elections**

MPs are elected at a General Election, which is held at least every five years.
If an MP dies or resigns, there will be a fresh election, called a by-election, in his or her constituency.

MPs are elected through a system called ‘first past the post’. In each constituency, the candidate who gets the most votes is elected. The government is usually formed by the party that wins the majority of constituencies. If no party wins a majority, two parties may join together to form a coalition.

**Contacting elected members**

All elected members have a duty to serve and represent their constituents. You can get contact details for all your representatives and their parties from your local library and from www.parliament.uk. MPs, Assembly members, members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) and MEPs are also listed in *The Phone Book*, published by BT.

You can contact MPs by letter or telephone at their constituency office, or at their office in the House of Commons: The House of Commons, Westminster, London SW1A 0AA, telephone 020 7129 3000. In addition, many MPs, Assembly members, MSPs and MEPs hold regular local ‘surgeries’, where constituents can go in person to talk about issues that are of concern to them. These surgeries are often advertised in the local newspaper.

**Check that you understand**

- How democracy has developed in the UK
- What a constitution is and how the UK’s constitution is different from those of most other countries
- The role of the monarch
- The role of the House of Commons and House of Lords
- What the Speaker does
- How the UK elects MPs and MEPs
The government

The Prime Minister

The Prime Minister (PM) is the leader of the political party in power. He or she appoints the members of the cabinet (see below) and has control over many important public appointments. The official home of the Prime Minister is 10 Downing Street, in central London, near the Houses of Parliament. He or she also has a country house outside London called Chequers.

The Prime Minister can be changed if the MPs in the governing party decide to do so, or if he or she wishes to resign. The Prime Minister usually resigns if his or her party loses a General Election.

The cabinet

The Prime Minister appoints about 20 senior MPs to become ministers in charge of departments. These include:

- Chancellor of the Exchequer – responsible for the economy
- Home Secretary – responsible for crime, policing and immigration
- Foreign Secretary - responsible for managing relationships with foreign countries
- Other ministers (called ‘Secretaries of State’) responsible for subjects such as education, health and defence.

These ministers form the cabinet, a committee which usually meets weekly and makes important decisions about government policy. Many of the decisions have to be debated or approved by Parliament.

Each department also has a number of other ministers, called Ministers of State and Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State, who take charge of particular areas of the department’s work.

The opposition

The second-largest party in the House of Commons is called the opposition. The leader of the opposition usually becomes Prime Minister if his or her party wins the next General Election.

The leader of the opposition leads his or her party in pointing out what they see as the government’s failures and weaknesses. One important opportunity to do this is at Prime Minister’s Questions, which takes place...
every week while Parliament is sitting. The leader of the opposition also appoints senior opposition MPs to be ‘shadow ministers’. They form the shadow cabinet and their role is to challenge the government and put forward alternative policies.

**The party system**

Anyone aged 18 or over can stand for election as an MP but they are unlikely to win unless they have been nominated to represent one of the major political parties. These are the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, or one of the parties representing Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish interests.

There are a few MPs who do not represent any of the main political parties. They are called ‘independents’ and usually represent an issue important to their constituency.

The main political parties actively look for members of the public to join their debates, contribute to their costs, and help at elections for Parliament or for local government. They have branches in most constituencies and hold policy-making conferences every year.

Pressure and lobby groups are organisations which try to influence government policy. They play an important role in politics. Some are representative organisations such as the CBI (Confederation of British Industry), which represents the views of British business. Others campaign on particular topics, such as the environment (for example, Greenpeace) or human rights (for example, Liberty).

**The civil service**

Civil servants support the government in developing and implementing its policies. They also deliver public services. Civil servants are accountable to ministers. They are chosen on merit and are politically neutral – they are not political appointees. People can apply to join the civil service through an application process, like other jobs in the UK. Civil servants are expected to carry out their role with dedication and a commitment to the civil service and its core values. These are: integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality (including being politically neutral).

**Local government**

Towns, cities and rural areas in the UK are governed by democratically elected councils, often called ‘local authorities’. Some areas have both district and county councils, which have different functions. Most large towns and cities have a single local authority.
Local authorities provide a range of services in their areas. They are funded by money from central government and by local taxes.

Many local authorities appoint a mayor, who is the ceremonial leader of the council. In some towns, a mayor is elected to be the effective leader of the administration. London has 33 local authorities, with the Greater London Authority and the Mayor of London coordinating policies across the capital. For most local authorities, local elections for councillors are held in May every year. Many candidates stand for council election as members of a political party.

**Devolved administrations**

Since 1997, some powers have been devolved from the central government to give people in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland more control over matters that directly affect them. There has been a Welsh Assembly and a Scottish Parliament since 1999. There is also a Northern Ireland Assembly, although this has been suspended on a few occasions.

Policy and laws governing defence, foreign affairs, immigration, taxation and social security all remain under central UK government control. However, many other public services, such as education, are controlled by the devolved administrations.

The devolved administrations each have their own civil service.

**The Welsh government**

The Welsh government and National Assembly for Wales are based in Cardiff, the capital city of Wales. The National Assembly has 60 Assembly members (AMs) and elections are held every four years using a form of proportional representation. Members can speak in either Welsh or English, and all of the Assembly’s publications are in both languages.

The Assembly has the power to make laws for Wales in 21 areas, including:

- education and training
- health and social services
- economic development
- housing.

Since 2011, the National Assembly for Wales has been able to pass laws on these topics without the agreement of the UK Parliament.
The Welsh Assembly building opened in March 2006

The Scottish Parliament

The Scottish Parliament was formed in 1999. It sits in Edinburgh, the capital city of Scotland.

There are 129 members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs), elected by a form of proportional representation. The Scottish Parliament can pass laws for Scotland of all matters which are not specifically reserved to the UK Parliament. The matters on which the Scottish Parliament can legislate include:

- Civil and criminal law
- Health
- Education
- Planning
- Additional tax-raising powers.
A Northern Ireland Parliament was established in 1922, when Ireland was divided, but it was abolished in 1972, shortly after the Troubles broke out in 1969 (see page 55).

The Northern Ireland Assembly was established soon after the Belfast Agreement (or Good Friday Agreement) in 1998. There is a power-sharing agreement which distributes ministerial offices amongst the main parties. The Assembly has 108 elected members, known as MLAs (members of the Legislative Assembly). They are elected with a form of proportional representation.

The Northern Ireland Assembly can make decisions on issues such as:

- education
- agriculture
- the environment
- health
- social services.
The UK government has the power to suspend all devolved assemblies. It has used this power several times in Northern Ireland when local political leaders found it difficult to work together.

The Northern Ireland Assembly building, known as Stormont

The media and government

Proceedings in Parliament are broadcast on television and published in official reports called Hansard. Written reports can be found in large libraries and at www.parliament.uk. Most people get information about political issues and events from newspapers (often called ‘the press’), television, radio and the internet.

The UK has a free press. This means that what is written in newspapers is free from government control. Some newspaper owners and editors hold strong political opinions and run campaigns to try to influence government policy and public opinion.

By law, radio and television coverage of the political parties must be balanced and so equal time has to be given to rival viewpoints.
Check that you understand

- The role of the Prime Minister, cabinet, opposition and shadow cabinet.
- The role of political parties in the UK system of government
- Who the main political parties are
- What pressure and lobby groups do
- The role of the civil service
- The role of local government
- The powers of the devolved governments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland
- How proceedings in Parliament are recorded
- The role of the media in keeping people informed about political issues

Who can vote?

The UK has had a fully democratic voting system since 1928. The present voting age of 18 was set in 1969 and (with a few exceptions) all UK-born and naturalised adult citizens have the right to vote.

Adult citizens of the UK, and citizens of the Commonwealth and Ireland who are resident in the UK, can vote in all public elections.

The electoral register

To be able to vote in a parliamentary or local election, you must have your name on the electoral register.

If you are eligible to vote, you can register by contacting your local council electoral registration office. This is usually based at your local council (in Scotland it may be based elsewhere). If you don’t know which local authority you come under, you can find out by visiting www.aboutmyvote.co.uk and entering your postcode. You can also download voter registration forms in English, Welsh and some other languages.

The electoral register is updated every year in September or October. An electoral registration form is sent to every household and this has to be completed and returned with the names of everyone who is resident in the household and eligible to vote.

In Northern Ireland a different system operates. This is called ‘individual registration’ and all those entitled to vote must complete their own
registration form. Once registered, people stay on the register provided their personal details do not change. For more information see the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland website at www.eoni.org.uk

By law, each local authority has to make its electoral register available for anyone to look at, although this has to be supervised. The register is kept at each local electoral registration office (or council office in England and Wales). It is also possible to see the register at some public buildings such as libraries.

**Where to vote**

People vote in elections at places called polling stations, or polling places in Scotland. Before the election you will be sent a poll card. This tells you where your polling station or polling place is and when the election will take place. On election day, the polling station or place will be open from 7.00 am until 10.00 pm.

When you arrive at the polling station, the staff will ask for your name and address. In Northern Ireland you will also have to show photographic identification. You will then get your ballot paper, which you take to a polling booth to fill in privately. You should make up your own mind who to vote for. No one has the right to make you vote for a particular candidate. You should follow the instructions on ballot paper. Once you have completed it, put it in the ballot box.

If it is difficult for you to get to a polling station or polling place, you can register for a postal ballot. Your ballot paper will be sent to your home before the election. You then fill it in and post it back. You can choose to do this when you register to vote.

**Standing for office**

Most citizens of the UK, Ireland or the Commonwealth aged 18 or over can stand for public office. There are some exceptions, including:

- Members of the armed forces
- Civil servants
- People found guilty of certain criminal offences.

Members of the House of Lords may not stand for election to the House of Commons but are eligible for all other public offices.
Visiting Parliament and the devolved administrations

The UK Parliament

The public can listen to debates in the Palace of Westminster from public galleries in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

You can write to your local MP in advance to ask for tickets or you can Queue on the day at the public entrance. Entrance is free. Sometimes there are long queues for the House of Commons and people have to wait for at least one or two hours. It is usually easier to get in to the House of Lords.

You can find further information on the UK Parliament website at www.parliament.uk

Northern Ireland Assembly

In Northern Ireland elected members, known as MLAs, meet in the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont, in Belfast.

If you wish to visit Stormont, you can either contact the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Service (http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/visit), go to the Northern Ireland Assembly website (http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/visit-and-learning/) or contact an MLA.

Scottish Parliament

In Scotland the elected members, called MSPs, meet in the Scottish Parliament building at Holyrood in Edinburgh (for more information, see www.scottish.parliament.uk).

You can get information, book tickets or arrange tours through visitor services. You can write to them at the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP, telephone 0131 348 5200, free phone 0800 092 7600 or email visit@parliament.scot

National Assembly for Wales

In Wales the elected members, known as AMs, meet in the Welsh Assembly in the Senedd in Cardiff Bay (for more information, see www.assembly.wales).

The Senedd is an open building. You can book guided tours or seats in the public galleries for the Welsh Assembly. To make a booking, contact the Assembly Booking Service on 0300 200 6565 or email contact@assembly.wales or visit www.assembly.wales for an online booking form.

This material is based on the "Life in the United Kingdom: A Guide for New Residents – 3rd Edition" handbook and reproduced with the permission of Controller of HMSO under Open Parliament Licence. © Crown copyright. This reproduction is provided solely for the convenience of our users and is for studying purposes. This reproduction is for your sole use only. You may not distribute, republish, display, post or transmit this reproduction.
The UK and international institutions

The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth is an association of countries that support each other and work together towards shared goals in democracy and development. Most member states were once part of the British Empire, although a few countries which were not have also joined.

The Queen is the ceremonial head of the Commonwealth, which currently has 54 member states (see table below). Membership is voluntary. The Commonwealth has no power over its members, although it can suspend membership. The Commonwealth is based on the core values of democracy, good government and the rule of law.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commonwealth members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antigua and Barbuda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botswana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiji</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grenada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesotho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maldives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papua New Guinea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seychelles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solomon Islands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Kitts and Nevis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swaziland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad and Tobago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Council of Europe

The Council of Europe has 47 member countries, including the UK, and is responsible for the protection and promotion of human rights in those countries. It has no power to make laws but draws up conventions and charters, the most well-known of which is the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, usually called the European Convention on Human Rights.

The United Nations

The UK is part of the United Nations (UN), an international organization with more than 190 countries as members.

The UN was set up after the Second World War and aims to prevent war and promote international peace and security. There are 15 members on the UN Security Council, which recommends action when there are international crises and threats to peace. The UK is one of five permanent members of the Security Council.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

The UK is also a member of NATO. NATO is a group of European and North American countries that have agreed to help each other if they come under attack. It also aims to maintain peace between all of its members.

Check that you understand

- What the Commonwealth is and its role
- Other international organisations of which the UK is a member

Respecting the law

One of the most important responsibilities of all residents in the UK is to know and obey the law. This section will tell you about the legal system in the UK and some of the laws that may affect you. Britain is proud of being a welcoming country, but all residents, regardless of their background, are expected to comply with the law and to understand that some things which
may be allowed in other legal systems are not acceptable in the UK. Those who do not respect the law should not expect to be allowed to become permanent residents of the UK.

The law is relevant to all areas of life in the UK. You should make sure that you are aware of the laws which affect your everyday life, including both your personal and business affairs.

**The law in the UK**

Every person in the UK receives equal treatment under the law. This means that the law applies in the same way to everyone, no matter who they are or where they are from.

Laws can be divided into criminal law and civil law:

- Criminal law relates to crimes, which are usually investigated by the police or another authority such as a council, and which are punished by the courts.
- Civil law is used to settle disputes between individuals or groups.

Examples of criminal laws are:

- Carrying a weapon: it is a criminal offence to carry a weapon of any kind, even if it is for self-defence. This includes a gun, a knife or anything that is made or adapted to cause injury.
- Drugs: selling or buying drugs such as heroin, cocaine, ecstasy and cannabis is illegal in the UK.
- Racial crime: it is a criminal offence to cause harassment, alarm or distress to someone because of their religion or ethnic origin.
- Selling tobacco: it is illegal to sell tobacco products (for example, cigarettes, cigars, roll-up tobacco) to anyone under the age of 18.
- Smoking in public places: it is against the law to smoke tobacco products in nearly every enclosed public place in the UK. There are signs displayed to tell you where you cannot smoke.
- Buying alcohol: it is a criminal offence to sell alcohol to anyone who is under 18 or to buy alcohol for people who are under the age of 18. (There is one exception: people aged 16 or over can drink alcohol with a meal in a hotel or restaurant.)
- Drinking in public: some places have alcohol-free zones where you cannot drink in public. The police can also confiscate alcohol or move young people on from public places. You can be fined or arrested.
This list does not include all crimes. There are many that apply in most countries, such as murder, theft and assault. You can find out more about types of crime in the UK at www.gov.uk

Example of civil laws are:

- **Housing law**: this includes disputes between landlords and tenants over issues such as repairs and eviction.
- **Consumer rights**: an example of this is a dispute about faulty goods or services.
- **Employment law**: these cases include disputes over wages and cases of unfair dismissal or discrimination in the workplace.
- **Debt**: people might be taken to court if they owe money to someone.

**The police and their duties**

The job of the police in the UK is to:

- Protect life and property
- Prevent disturbances (also known as keeping the peace)
- Prevent and detect crime.

The police are organised into a number of separate police forces headed by Chief Constables. They are independent of the government.

In November 2012, the public elected Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) in England and Wales. These are directly elected individuals who are responsible for the delivery of an efficient and effective police force that reflects the needs of their local communities. PCCs set local police priorities and the local policing budget. They also appoint the local Chief Constable.

The police force is a public service that helps and protects everyone, no matter what their background or where they live. Police officers must themselves obey the law. They must not misuse their authority, make a false statement, be rude or abusive, or commit racial discrimination. If police officers corrupt or misuse their authority they are severely punished.

Police officers are supported by the police community support officers (PCSOs). PCSOs have different roles according to the area but usually patrol the streets, work with the public, and support police officers at crime scenes and major events.
All people in the UK are expected to help the police prevent and detect crimes whenever they can. If you are arrested and taken to a police station, a police officer will tell you the reason for your arrest and you will be able to seek legal advice.

If something goes wrong, the police complaints system tries to put it right. Anyone can make a complaint about the police by going to a police station and writing to the Chief Constable of the police force involved. Complaints can also be made to an independent body in England and Wales (www.policeconduct.gov.uk). In Scotland, if you are unhappy with the way your complaint has been handled, you can contact the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner at https://pirc.scot/. In Northern Ireland, you should contact the Police Ombudsman’s Office (www.policeombudsman.org).

**Terrorism and extremism**

The UK faces a range of terrorist threats. The most serious of these is from Al Qa‘ida, its affiliates and like-minded organisations. The UK also faces
threats from other kind of terrorism, such as Northern Ireland-related terrorism.

All terrorist groups try to radicalise and recruit people to their cause. How, where and to what extent they try to do so will vary. Evidence shows that these groups attract very low levels of public support, but people who want to make their home in the UK should be aware of this threat. It is important that all citizens feel safe. This includes feeling safe from all kinds of extremism (vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values), including religious extremism and far-right extremism.

If you think someone is trying to persuade you to join an extremist or terrorist cause, you should notify your local police force.

Check that you understand

- The difference between civil and criminal law and some examples of each
- The duties of the police
- The possible terrorist threats facing the UK

The role of the courts

The judiciary

Judges (who are together called ‘the judiciary’) are responsible for interpreting the law and ensuring that trials are conducted fairly. The government cannot interfere with this.

Sometimes the actions of the government are claimed to be illegal. If the judges agree, then the government must either change its policies or ask Parliament to change the law. If judges find that a public body is not respecting someone’s legal rights, they can order that body to change its practices and/or pay compensation.

Judges also make decisions in disputes between members of the public or organisations. These might be about contracts, property or employment rights or after an accident.
Criminal courts

There are some differences between the court systems in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Magistrates’ and Justice of the Peace Courts

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, most minor criminal cases are dealt with in a Magistrates’ Court. In Scotland, minor criminal offences go to a Justice of the Peace Court.

Magistrates and Justices of the Peace (JPs) are members of the local community. In England, Wales and Scotland they usually work unpaid and do not need legal qualifications. They receive training to do the job and are supported by a legal adviser. Magistrates decide the verdict in each case that comes before them and, if the person is found guilty, the sentence that they are given. In Northern Ireland, cases are heard by a District Judge or Deputy District Judge, who is legally qualified and paid.

Crown Courts and Sheriff Courts

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, serious offences are tried in front of a judge and a jury in a Crown Court. In Scotland, serious cases are heard in a Sheriff Court with either a sheriff or a sheriff with a jury. The most serious cases in Scotland, such as murder, are heard at a High Court with a judge and jury. A jury is made up of members of the public chosen at random from the local electoral register. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland a jury has 12 members, and in Scotland a jury has 15 members. Everyone who is summoned to do jury service must do it unless they are not eligible (for example, because they have a criminal conviction) or they provide a good reason to be excused, such as ill health.

The jury has to listen to the evidence presented at the trial and then decide a verdict of ‘guilty’ or ‘not guilty’ based of what they have heard. In Scotland, a third verdict of ‘not proven’ is also possible. If the jury finds a defendant guilty, the judge decides the penalty.

Youth Courts

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, if an accused person is aged 10 to 17, the case is normally heard in a Youth Court in front of up to three specially trained magistrates or a District Judge. The most serious cases will go to the Crown Court. The parents or carers of the young person are expected to attend the hearing. Members of the public are not allowed in Youth Courts, and the name or photographs of the accused young person cannot be published in newspapers or used by the media.
In Scotland a system called the Children’s Hearings System is used to deal with children and young people who have committed an offence.

Northern Ireland has a system of youth conferencing to consider how a child should be dealt with when they have committed an offence.

Civil courts

County Courts

County Courts deal with a wide range of civil disputes. These include people trying to get back money that is owed to them, cases involving personal
injury, family matters, breaches of contract, and divorce. In Scotland, most of these matters are dealt with in the Sheriff Court. More serious civil cases – for example, when a large amount of compensation is being claimed – are dealt with in the High Court of England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In Scotland, they are dealt with in the Court of Session in Edinburgh.

**The small claims procedure**

The small claims procedure is an informal way of helping people to settle minor disputes without spending a lot of time and money using a lawyer. This procedure is used for claims of less than £10,000 in England and Wales and £3,000 in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The hearing is held in front of a judge in an ordinary room, and people from both sides of the dispute sit around a table. Small claims can also be issued online through Money Claims Online (www.moneyclaim.gov.uk).

You can get details about the small claims procedure from your local County Court or Sheriff Court. Details of your local court can be found as follows:

- England and Wales: at www.gov.uk
- Scotland: at www.scotcourts.gov.uk
- Northern Ireland: at www.courtsni.gov.uk

**Legal advice**

**Solicitors**

Solicitors are trained lawyers who give advice on legal matters, take action for their clients and represent their clients in court.

There are solicitors’ offices throughout the UK. It is important to find out which aspects of law a solicitor specialises in and to check that they have the right experience to help you with your case. Many advertise in local newspapers. Citizens Advice Bureau (www.citizensadvice.org.uk) can give you names of local solicitors and which areas of law they specialise in. You can also get this information from the Law Society (www.lawsociety.org.uk) in England and Wales, the Law Society of Scotland (www.lawscot.org.uk) or the Law Society of Northern Ireland (www.lawsoc-ni.org). Solicitors’ charges are usually based on how much time they spend of a case. It is very important to find out at the start how much a case is likely to cost.
Check that you understand

- The role of the judiciary
- About the different criminal courts in the UK
- About the different civil courts in the UK
- How you can settle a small claim

Fundamental principles

Britain has a long history of respecting an individual’s rights and ensuring essential freedoms. These rights have their roots in Magna Carta, the Habeas Corpus Act and the Bill of Rights of 1689, and they have developed over a period of time. British diplomats and lawyers had an important role in drafting the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. The UK was one of the first countries to sign the Convention in 1950.

Some of the principles included in the European Convention of Human Rights are:

- right to life
- prohibition of torture
- prohibition of slavery and forced labour
- right to liberty and security
- right to a fair trial
- freedom of thought, conscience and religion
- freedom of expression (speech).

The Human Rights Act 1998 incorporated the European Convention of Human Rights into UK law. The government, public bodies and the courts must follow the principles of the Convention.
Equal opportunities

UK laws ensure that people are not treated unfairly in any area of life or work because of their age, disability, sex, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sexuality or marital status. If you face problems with discrimination, you can get more information from Citizens Advice or from one of the following organisations:

- Northern Ireland: Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (www.equalityni.org)

Domestic violence

In the UK, brutality and violence in the home is a serious crime. Anyone who is violent towards their partner – whether they are a man or a woman, married or living together – can be prosecuted. Any man who forces a woman to have sex, including a woman’s husband, can be charged with rape.

It is important for anyone facing domestic violence to get help as soon as possible. A solicitor or Citizens Advice can explain the available options. In some areas there are safe places to go and stay in, called refuges or shelters. The 24-hour National Domestic Violence Freephone Helpline on 0808 2000 247 at any time, and its voicemail service allows callers to leave a message to be called back. You can find out more by visiting its website on www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk. Alternatively, you can try the Women’s Aid website on https://www.womensaid.org.uk. In an emergency, you should always call the police, who can also help you to find a safe place to stay.

Female genital mutilation

Female genital mutilation (FGM), also known as cutting or female circumcision, is illegal in the UK. Practicing FGM or taking a girl or woman abroad for FGM is a criminal offence.

Forced marriage

A marriage should be entered into with the full and free consent of both people involved. Arranged marriages, where both parties agree to the marriage, are acceptable in the UK.
Forced marriage is where one or both parties do not or cannot give their consent to enter into the partnership. Forcing another person to marry is a criminal offence.

Forced Marriage Protection Orders were introduced in 2008 for England, Wales and Northern Ireland under the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act 2007. Court orders can be obtained to protect a person from being forced into a marriage, or to protect a person in a forced marriage. Similar Protection Orders were introduced in Scotland in November 2011.

A potential victim, or someone acting for them, can apply for an order. Anyone found to have breached an order can be jailed for up to two years for contempt of court.

**Taxation**

**Income tax**

People in the UK have to pay tax on their income, which includes:

- Wages from paid employment
- Profits from self-employment
- Taxable benefits
- Pensions
- Income from property, savings and dividends.

Money raised from income tax pays for government services such as roads, education, police and the armed forces.

For most people, the right amount of income tax is automatically taken from their income from employment by their employer and paid directly to HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC), the government department that collects taxes. This system is called “Pay As You Earn” (PAYE). If you are self-employed, you need to pay your own tax through a system called ‘self-assessment’, which includes completing a tax return. Other people may also need to complete a tax return. If HMRC sends you a tax return, it is important to complete and return the form as soon as you have all the necessary information.

You can find out more about income tax at www.gov.uk/income-tax. You can get help and advice about taxes and completing tax forms from the HMRC.
National Insurance

Almost everybody in the UK who is in paid work, including self-employed people, must pay National Insurance Contributions. The money raised from National Insurance Contributions is used to pay for state benefits and services such as the state retirement pension and the National Health Service (NHS).

Employees have their National Insurance Contributions deducted from their pay by their employer. People who are self-employed need to pay National Insurance Contributions themselves.

Anyone who does not pay enough National Insurance Contributions will not be able to receive certain contributory benefits such as Jobseeker’s Allowance or a full state retirement pension. Some workers, such as part-time workers, may not qualify for statutory payments such as maternity pay if they do not earn enough.


Getting a National Insurance number

A National Insurance number is a unique personal account number. It makes sure that the National Insurance Contributions and tax you pay are properly recorded against your name. All young people in the UK are sent a National Insurance number just before their 16th birthday.

A non-UK national living in the UK and looking for work, starting work or setting up as self-employed will need a National Insurance number. However, you can start work without one. If you have permission to work in the UK, you will need to telephone the National Insurance number applications line. After you’ve applied, you’ll get a letter from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) asking you to come to a National Insurance number interview at Jobcentre Plus. The letter will also tell you which documents to bring to prove your identity. You can find out more information about how to apply for a National Insurance number at https://www.gov.uk/apply-national-insurancenumber. You may be required to attend an interview. The DWP will advise you of the appropriate application process and tell you which documents you will need to bring to an interview if one is necessary. You will usually need documents that prove your identity and that you have permission to work in the UK. A National Insurance number does not on its own prove to an employer that you have the right to work in the UK.
You can find out more information about how to apply for a National Insurance number at www.gov.uk.

**Driving**

In the UK, you must be at least 17 years to drive a car or motor cycle and you must have a driving licence to drive on public roads. To get a UK driving licence you must pass a driving test, which tests both your knowledge and your practical skills. You need to be at least 16 years old to ride a moped, and there are other age requirements and special tests for driving large vehicles.

Drivers can use their driving licence until they are 70 years old. After that, the licence is valid for three years at a time.

In Northern Ireland, a newly qualified driver must display an ‘R’ plate (for restricted driver) for one year after passing the test.

If you have a licence from another country, you may use it in the UK for up to 12 months. To continue driving after that, you must get a UK full driving licence. To check that you can drive in the UK with a non-GB licence, visit www.gov.uk/driving-nongb-licence.

If you are resident in the UK, your car or motor cycle must be registered at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA). You must pay an annual road tax, which cannot be passed on when a vehicle changes hands. If the vehicle is parked off the road and not being used, you must tell DVLA by making a Statutory Off Road Notification (SORN). SORN cannot be transferred if the vehicle is sold or given to a new owner. You must also have valid motor insurance. It is a serious criminal offence to drive without insurance. If your vehicle is over three years old, you must take it for a Ministry of Transport (MOT) test every year. It is an offence not to have an MOT certificate if your vehicle is more than three years old. You can find out more about vehicle tax and MOT requirements from www.gov.uk.

**Check that you understand**

- The fundamental principle of UK law
- That domestic violence, FGM and forced marriage are illegal in the UK
- The system of income tax and National Insurance
- The requirements for driving a car
Your role in the community

Becoming a British citizen or settling in the UK brings responsibilities but also opportunities. Everyone has the opportunity to participate in their community. This section looks at some of the responsibilities of being a citizen and gives information about how you can help to make your community a better place to live and work.

Values and responsibilities

Although Britain is one of the world’s most diverse societies, there is a set of shared values and responsibilities that everyone can agree with. These values and responsibilities include:

- To obey and respect the law
- To be aware of the rights of others and respect those rights
- To treat others with fairness
- To behave responsibly
- To help and protect your family
- To respect and preserve the environment
- To treat everyone equally, regardless of sex, race, religion, age, disability, class or sexual orientation
- To work to provide for yourself and your family
- To help others
- To vote in local and national government elections.

Taking on these values and responsibilities will make it easier for you to become a full and active citizen.

Being a good neighbour

When you move into a new house or apartment, introduce yourself to the people who live near you. Getting to know your neighbours can help you to become part of the community and make friends. Your neighbours are also a good source of help – for example, they may be willing to feed your pets if you are away, or offer advice on local shops and services.

You can help prevent any problems and conflicts with your neighbours by respecting their privacy and limiting how much noise you make. Also try to keep your garden tidy, and only put your refuse bags and bins on the street or in communal areas if they are due to be collected.

This material is based on the "Life in the United Kingdom: A Guide for New Residents – 3rd Edition" handbook and reproduced with the permission of Controller of HMSO under Open Parliament Licence. © Crown copyright. This reproduction is provided solely for the convenience of our users and is for studying purposes. This reproduction is for your sole use only. You may not distribute, republish, display, post or transmit this reproduction.
Getting involved in local activities

Volunteering and helping your community are an important part of being a good citizen. They enable you to integrate and get to know other people. It helps to make your community a better place if residents support each other. It also helps you to fulfil your duties as a citizen, such as behaving responsibly and helping others.

How you can support your community

There are a number of positive ways in which you can support your community and be a good citizen.

Jury service

As well as getting the right to vote, people on the electoral register are randomly selected to serve on a jury. Anyone who is on the electoral register and is aged 18 to 70 (18-75 in England and Wales) can be asked to do this.

Helping in schools

Parents often help in classrooms, by supporting activities or listening to children read
If you have children, there are many ways in which you can help at their schools. Parents can often help in classrooms, by supporting activities or listening to children read.

Many schools organise events to raise money for extra equipment or out-of-school activities. Activities might include book sales, toy sales or bringing food to sell. You might have good ideas of your own for raising money. Sometimes events are organised by parent-teacher associations (PTAs). Volunteering to help with their events or joining the association is a way of doing something good for the school and also making new friends in your local community. You can find out about these opportunities from notices in the school or notes your children bring home.

**School governors and school boards**

School governors, or members of the school board in Scotland, are people from the local community who wish to make a positive contribution to their children’s education. They must be aged 18 or over at the date of their election or appointment. There is no upper age limit.

Governors and school boards have an important part to play in raising school standards. They have three key roles:

- Setting the strategic direction of the school
- Ensuring accountability
- Monitoring and evaluating school performance.

You can contact your local school to ask if they need a new governor or school board member. In England, you can also apply online at the Governors for Schools website at www.governorsforschools.org.uk.

In England, parents and other community groups can apply to open a free school in their local area. More information about this can be found at https://www.gov.uk/set-up-free-school.

**Supporting political parties**

Political parties welcome new members. Joining one is a way to demonstrate your support for certain views and to get involved in the democratic process.

Political parties are particularly busy at election times. Members work hard to persuade people to vote for their candidates – for instance, by handing out leaflets in the street or by knocking on people’s doors and asking for their support. This is called ‘canvassing’. You don’t have to tell a canvasser how you intend to vote if you don't want to.
British citizens can stand for office as a local councillor or a member of Parliament (or the devolved equivalents). This is an opportunity to become even more involved in the political life of the UK. You may also be able to stand for office if you are an Irish citizen or an eligible Commonwealth citizen.

You can find out more about joining a political party from the individual party websites.

**Helping with local services**

There are opportunities to volunteer with a wide range of local service providers, including local hospitals and youth projects. Services often want to involve local people in decisions about the way in which they work. Universities, housing associations, museums and arts councils may advertise for people to serve as volunteers in their governing bodies.

You can volunteer with the police, and become a special constable or a lay (non-police) representative. You can also apply to become a magistrate. You will often find advertisements for vacancies in your local newspaper or on local radio. You can also find out more about these sorts of roles at www.gov.uk.

**Blood and organ donation**

Donated blood is used by hospitals to help people with a wide range of injuries and illnesses. Giving blood only takes about an hour to do. You can register to give blood at:

- England and North Wales: www.blood.co.uk
- Rest of Wales: www.welsh-blood.org.uk
- Scotland: www.scotblood.co.uk
- Northern Ireland: https://nibts.hscni.net.

Many people in the UK are waiting for organ transplants. If you register to be an organ donor, it can make it easier for your family to decide whether to donate your organs when you die. You can register to be an organ donor at www.organdonation.nhs.uk. Living people can also donate a kidney.

**Other ways to volunteer**

Volunteering is working for good causes without payment. There are many benefits to volunteering, such as meeting new people and helping make your community a better place. Some volunteer activities will give you a chance to practise your English or develop work skills that will help you find or...
improve your curriculum vitae (CV). Many people volunteer simply because they want to help other people.

Activities you can do as a volunteer include:

- working with animals – for example, caring for animals at a local rescue shelter
- youth work – for example, volunteering at a youth group
- helping improve the environment – for example, participating in a litter pick-up in the local area
- working with the homeless in, for example, a homelessness shelter
- mentoring – for example, supporting someone who has just come out of prison
- work in health and hospitals – for example, working on an information desk in a hospital
- helping older people at, for example, a residential care home.
There are thousands of active charities and voluntary organizations in the UK. They work to improve the lives of people, animals and the environment in many different ways. They range from the British Red Cross, to small local charities working in particular areas. They include charities working with older people (such as Age UK), with children (for example, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)), and with the homeless (for example, Crisis and Shelter). There are also medical research charities (for example, Cancer Research UK), environmental charities (including the National Trust and Friends of the Earth) and charities working with animals (such as the People’s Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA)).

Volunteers are needed to help with their activities and to raise money. The charities often advertise in local newspapers, and most have websites that include information about their opportunities. You can also get information about volunteering for different organisations from https://do-it.org

There are many opportunities for younger people to volunteer and receive accreditation which will help them to develop their skills. These include the National Citizen Service programme, which gives 16- and 17-year-olds the opportunity to enjoy outdoor activities, develop their skills and take part in a community project. You can find out more about these opportunities as follows:

- National Citizen Service: at wearencs.com
- England: at www.vinspired.com
- Wales: at volunteering-wales.net/vk/volunteers/index.htm
- Scotland: at www.volunteerscotland.net
- Northern Ireland: at www.volunteernow.co.uk

**Looking after the environment**

It is important to recycle as much of your waste as you can. Using recycled materials to make new products uses less energy and means that we do not need to extract more raw materials from the earth. It also means that less rubbish is created, so the amount being put into landfill is reduced.

You can learn more about recycling and it benefits at www.recyclenow.com. At this website you can also find out what you can recycle at home and in the local area you live in England. This information is available for Wales at www.wasteawarenesswales.org.uk, for Scotland at www.recyleforscotland.com and for Northern Ireland from your local authority.
A good way to support your local community is to shop for products locally where you can. This will help businesses and farmers in your area in Britain. It will also reduce your carbon footprint, because the products you buy will not have had to travel as far.

Walking and using public transport to get around when you can is also a good way to protect the environment. It means that you create less pollution than when you use a car.

Check that you understand

- The different ways you can help at your child’s school
- The role of school governors and members of school boards, and how you can become one
- The role of members of political parties
- The different local services people can volunteer to support
- How to donate blood and organs
- The benefit of volunteering for you, other people and the community
- The types of activities that volunteers can do
- How you can look after the environment