



How a bill becomes an Act of Parliament

The Law Society ('the Society') is the representative body for 145,000 solicitors in England and Wales. The Society negotiates on behalf of the profession, lobbies regulators, Government and others and has a public interest role in working for reform of the law

Key Points

1. This briefing is intended to act as a basic aid to understanding the process by which major pieces of government legislation ('public bills') become law, some of the terms involved and how to track the progress of a bill.
2. Some Bills begin their passage in the House of Commons, others in the House of Lords. Either way, they must go through the same stages in both Houses in order to become law. This briefing covers the following stages:

Preparatory stages > First Reading > Second Reading > Committee Stage > Report Stage > Third Reading > 'ping-pong' > Royal Assent

Preparatory stages

3. Bills are drafted by a team of lawyers in the Parliamentary Counsel Office, on the instructions of the department concerned. There may have been a green (i.e. consultative) or white (i.e. a statement of policy) paper covering the bills subject prior to its introduction, but these are not a requirement and the bill may simply be presented without prior announcement.
4. Since 2002, it has been possible for some bills to undergo 'pre-legislative scrutiny' by the relevant departmental select committee or an ad-hoc joint committee of MPs and Peers. The committee can take oral and written evidence from experts and interested parties, and may scrutinize the draft bill for several weeks. Following pre-legislative scrutiny a committee will produce a report detailing its views and the reasons for its decisions, which will be considered by the Government and Parliament before and during the actual Bill passes through its normal stages in the Commons and the Lords, usually the following year.

First Reading

5. A bill's First Reading is a simple formality whereby the bill's long and short titles are read and the House orders the bill to be printed.
6. Bill's that have been published in the current session of parliament can be found on the Parliament website by following [this link](#).

Second Reading

7. The Second Reading is the time at which the House considers the principle of the bill rather than the details of individual clauses. A Second Reading debate on a major government bill will commonly take a day, although uncontroversial bills will get less time.

8. After a bill has been given a Second Reading, any Money or Ways and Means resolutions are dealt with. These are necessary in order for the committee considering the bill to have the authority to consider provisions requiring expenditure or imposing a tax or charge.

Committee Stage

9. As soon as a bill has had its Second Reading, it is sent to a committee for a detailed examination of the text. The procedure for this stage differs between the House of Commons and the House of Lords.
10. In the House of Commons, since 2006, bills are most commonly sent to a public bill committee of between 16 and 50 MPs of the major political parties according to their relative strength within the Commons, i.e. a majority of MPs are from the governing parties. Public bill committees have broader powers than the standing committees they replaced. They can, for instance, take written and oral evidence from experts and interested parties prior to embarking on line-by-line deliberation.
11. In the House of Lords, the committee stage of most bills is taken as a committee of the whole house, or occasionally in grand committee and will immediately begin line-by-line scrutiny.
12. This is the first stage at which amendments can be tabled. Each bill will be given its own page on the parliament website, which will contain all of the latest updates.

Report Stage

13. At the Report Stage bills return to the floor of the House and all MPs or Peers (depending on which House the bill is in) may table or speak to amendments. At this stage the Bill is considered as a whole, rather than clause-by-clause and so only those clauses to which an amendment has been tabled will be considered.

Third Reading

14. The final required stage of a bill is the Third Reading. In the Commons this stage is usually taken immediately after the Report with both stages often only taking a day, and consists of a short debate taking an overview of the bill as a whole. In the Commons no amendments may be made at this stage.
15. In the House of Lords, the Third Reading is a little different. Both Report Stage and Third Reading can each take place over several days, and further amendments may be tabled if they cover an issue which has not been previously been the subject of a vote.

‘Ping-pong’

16. On occasion there is disagreement between the two Houses on a bill. Where the second House makes amendments to a bill, those amendments (but no other part of the bill) must be considered by the first House. If they are agreed then the bill is ready to become law. If they are not, however, then the second House looks at the matter again and can either insist upon its amendments or attempt compromise proposals.

Royal Assent

17. A bill passed by both Houses needs Royal Assent. The monarch’s approval is automatic; Queen Anne in 1707 was the last monarch to refuse to accept a bill passed by both Houses.