

The BRITISH POLITICAL SYSTEM:

The UK is a democracy because its government is elected by its citizens. The Queen is head of state, but has extremely limited powers. There are three major political parties - the Conservatives (or 'Tories'), Labour and Liberal Democrats (or 'Lib Dems').

The people who are elected to Parliament are called Members of Parliament (MPs). Each MP represents a different area, known as a 'constituency', and will look after the interests of everyone living there. If you have any serious problems you can contact your local MP. They meet in the House of Commons in Westminster, London. But they all have local 'surgeries'. The easiest way to locate your MP's surgery and/or their telephone number is to look in the phone-book.

The election of the Government [known as a 'General Election'] is held at intervals of not more than five years. UK citizens aged 18 and over can vote. The leader of the party that wins the General Election becomes 'Prime Minister'. The Labour Party forms the current government. The UK is part of the European Union (EU) and members (MEPs) are elected to the European Parliament.

Traditionally the elected MPs in the House of Commons have worked with the House of Lords, an unelected group of 'peers' (a word which, in this context, means 'lords and ladies'). Some of the members of the House of Lords are there because of hereditary rights, some are leading office-holders of the Church of England, but many others are there because of their achievements in everything from business to sport.

The UK is divided into counties (47 in England, 6 in Northern Ireland, 27 in Scotland, 24 in Wales). County councils are responsible for many services including education, social services, transport and libraries.

Counties are further divided into district councils and borough councils. All councils are known as Local Authorities (LAs) or Local Government. They are run by a mix of elected and career officials who are responsible for many things, including housing, standards of health in food and environment, maintaining parks, cleaning streets and collecting rubbish.

These services are paid, in the main by a local 'Council Tax' which is charged on each property. The budgets for the National Health Service, the police and emergency service, and education, all come in part from this taxation.