

Democracy at work in the UK

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2.1 Getting elected

Getting you thinking

'Politics affects all of our lives in many ways, whether you're going through education, paying tax or seeking security in old age. I wanted to be a Member of Parliament because I wanted a fair society where everyone is considered and treated fairly. Changes in the law affect everyone from a newborn baby to an elderly person.

I was trying to buy my first house in Cornwall. At the time I was working as a postman and had a second job and was trying to save a deposit for a home. There were over 200 people bidding for affordable homes. We were lucky to get one.

'I listened to the Prime Minister's first speech after the **general election**. He outlined what the government would do differently. He talked about cutting taxes for working people, removing unnecessary laws which were restricting business growth, and making it easier for people to keep more of the money they earn. It was at this point I realised I wanted to be involved in the party!



Scott Mann worked as a postman, before he got into politics

- 1 What made Scott decide to become an MP?
- 2 Why did Scott decide to join a political party?
- 3 Why does Scott think people should have their say?
- 4 What issues do politicians deal with?

Becoming a Member of Parliament

There are 650 Members of Parliament, or MPs. They have all been elected to represent a part of the country known as a constituency. If you want to become an MP, you need to be selected in a competitive process. The parties have different ways of doing this but, in general, you have to put yourself forward, be selected by the parties and then offer yourself to a constituency which you would like to represent. There will be interviews and **hustings**, where you have to stand up and explain what you believe and why you want to be the MP for this constituency. If the party members like what they hear, you will be selected to be their candidate. If you win the election, you then become the MP who represents everyone in the area.

A few people stand as independents and therefore do not go through the party system. This was the case with a doctor, Richard Taylor, who was furious that the local hospital was to be closed; he stood as an independent and won the seat.

Fighting an election

You have all seen posters everywhere at election time. A general election takes place every five years. The political parties know when it is going to be and plan well ahead.

To attract voters, the political parties and candidates will:

- send out leaflets telling people what they have done in the past and plan to do in future
- go **canvassing**
- attract press coverage
- hold public meetings.

There is a limit on how much parties can spend on electioneering.

What sort of democracy?

The UK is a **representative democracy**, so everyone who is entitled to vote takes part. We elect people who make decisions for us. **Direct democracy** is another system in which everyone votes on every issue through a **referendum**. This is how democracy started, but it gets very difficult to run in countries with large populations.

You will discover how an MP gets elected to the House of Commons and learn how the electoral system works.

Who can vote?

To vote in a UK general election you must be registered. This means being on the electoral register. If you are 18 years of age or more on polling day and a British citizen, a citizen of most Commonwealth countries or the Republic of Ireland, you will be able to vote.

The law states that you will not be able to vote if you:

- are a member of the House of Lords
- are an EU citizen resident in the UK
- are a convicted prisoner
- have been found guilty of corrupt practices in an election in the last five years.

There are arguments in the UK for young people over the age of 16 to have the vote. They were eligible to vote in the Scottish Referendum in 2014. Many people think that 16-year-olds are capable of making such decisions, but not all political parties favour it.

Votes at 16

Soila said: 'At 16, I may have a job, be married or have a child. 16-year-olds who work have to pay tax and we all pay VAT on things we buy. The government then spends that tax on what they choose. Shouldn't we play a part in deciding who has that responsibility?'



Counting the votes

In a general election, the system used in the UK is known as **first past the post**. It takes place when a single MP is elected to one **constituency**. When you vote, you put a cross in a box next to the candidate you would like to be elected. The candidate with the most votes in the constituency wins.

Action

- 1 Who is your local MP? Which political party do they belong to?
- 2 How many candidates were there at the last election in your constituency? Which parties did they represent? How many votes did each candidate win?

Check your understanding

- 1 How many MPs are there in the House of Commons?
- 2 What is the name for the area represented by an MP?
- 3 Do all candidates represent one of the main political parties? Explain your answer.
- 4 How do candidates try to attract voters?

Another point of view

'The voting age should be 16.'

Key Terms

- canvassing:** when people try to persuade others to vote for their party in an election
- constituency:** the area represented by an MP
- direct democracy:** a form of democracy in which everyone votes on every decision in a referendum
- first past the post:** an electoral system where voters have one vote in their constituency and the candidate with the most votes wins
- general election:** an election for a new government. In the UK, these take place at least every five years
- hustings:** a meeting at which candidates in an election speak to the voters
- referendum:** a vote by the whole electorate on a particular issue
- representative democracy:** a form of democracy in which people elect a representative to make decisions for them

2.2 Does everyone's vote count?

Getting you thinking



At the general election in 2015 there was a big difference in the percentage of votes cast for each party and the percentage of seats won. The votes and the 650 seats in the UK Parliament were allocated as follows.

- 1 Does this seem fair?
- 2 Approximately how many seats should each party have if the votes were allocated fairly?
- 3 Can you think of a way that would be fairer and ensure that everyone's vote counts?

Party	Votes won (%)	Seats won (%)	Seats won
Conservative	36.9	51	331
Labour	30.5	36	232
UKIP	12.6	0	1
Lib Dems	7.8	1	8
SNP	4.7	9	56
Green	3.8	0	1

Which voting system?

First past the post

As you learned on page 57, first past the post (FPTP) is used in UK general elections. It has both advantages and disadvantages.

The **advantages** of FPTP are:

- Extremist parties are unlikely to be elected as they won't be able to win enough votes in any one constituency.
- The result becomes clear very quickly, so the winning party can take over government as soon as the election is over.

The **disadvantages** of FPTP are:

- The number of votes cast for a party does not reflect the number of seats won. A party can win an election with a minority of the votes.
- Smaller parties tend to win few seats because they don't have enough support in each constituency.
- People may vote tactically to keep a party out rather than for the party they believe in.

Proportional representation

Proportional representation (PR) means that the number of seats a party wins is roughly proportional to the votes it receives in an election.

There are many different sorts of PR, but they all work in this way. In the simplest example, you have a large constituency and a list of candidates. You might vote for the candidate or the list, but each vote counts.

The **advantages** of PR are:

- no votes are wasted
- the number of seats the parties win reflects the percentage of votes cast for each party.

The **disadvantages** of PR are:

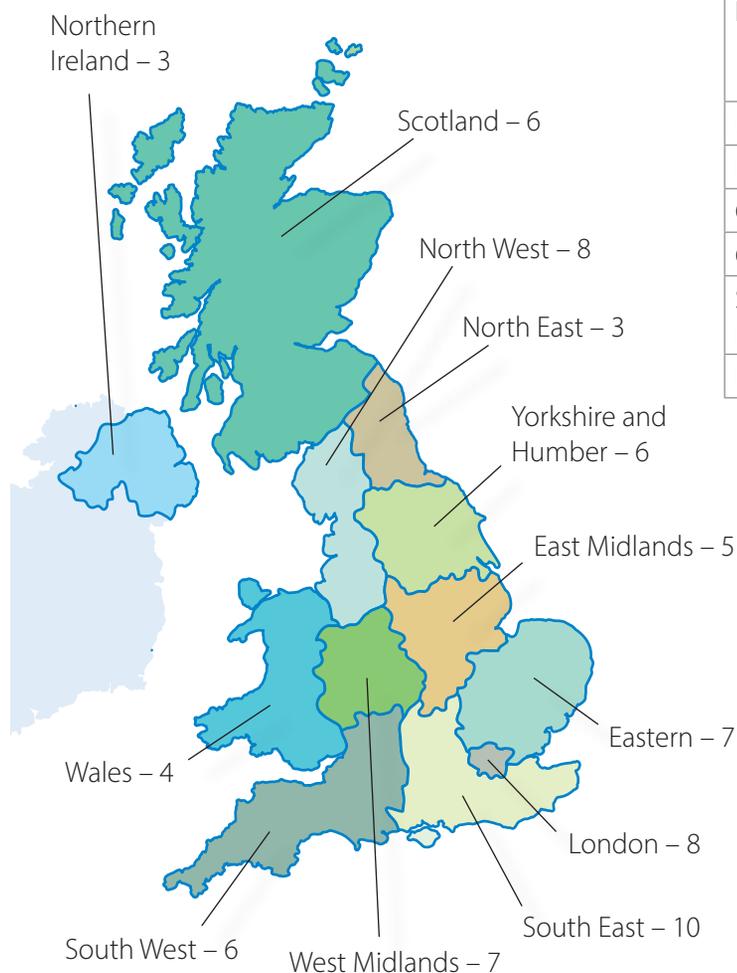
- it is difficult to stand as an independent candidate.
- the party can draw up the list of candidates so only people who agree with the powerful people in a party will be elected. This is not good for democracy.
- the elected MP has no local link in a big constituency.
- small parties can have unfair power over the larger parties by threatening to withdraw from a coalition.

You will learn about the advantages and disadvantages of different voting systems.

Elections for the European Parliament

Every five years, there are elections for the European Parliament. In the UK we elect 73 Members of the European Parliament (**MEPs**). They are elected in Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

There are 12 electoral regions in the UK, as shown on the map. Each region has between 3 and 10 MEPs.



MEPs are elected in England, Scotland and Wales by a system of PR known as the **closed-list system**. Each party in each region puts forward a list of people in the order they will be selected.

The ballot paper shows the parties' names and lists their candidates. Any independent candidates are listed at the end. The voter puts a cross next to the party or independent candidate they wish to vote for.

In 2014, there was an election for MEPs. In 2015, there was a UK general election. The outcomes were very different.

As the constituencies were larger, the votes for UKIP across the regions added up to many more seats.

European Election 2014		UK General Election 2015	
Party	Elected MEPs of 73	Party	Elected MPs of 650
UKIP	24	Conservative	331
Labour	20	Labour	232
Conservatives	19	Scottish Nationalists	56
Green	3	Liberal Democrats	8
Scottish Nationalists	2	Green	1
Liberal Democrats	1	UKIP	1

Check your understanding

- 1 What does FPTP stand for?
- 2 What does PR stand for?
- 3 What are the advantages and disadvantages of FPTP?
- 4 What are the advantages and disadvantages of PR?
- 5 Which electoral system is used for European elections in England, Scotland and Wales?
- 6 Is the same system used everywhere in Europe?

Another point of view

'Proportional representation must be used for all UK elections.'

Key Terms

closed-list system: a form of PR in which a party puts forward a list of candidates in the order they will be elected

MEP: Member of the European Parliament

proportional representation: an electoral system in which the number of seats a party wins is roughly proportional to its share of the votes in an election

2.3 Who shall I vote for?

Getting you thinking

Which paper do you read?

Newspapers let people know what's going on, but they can also affect the way people think. Some newspapers always reflect the ideas of one of the political parties, while others take a wider view.

What's your age, gender and ethnicity?

More young people and ethnic minorities vote Labour. More women used to vote Conservative, but the balance has now shifted.

Which social class are you in?

Upper- and middle-class people have tended to vote Conservative and working-class people to vote Labour. However, this divide has become less rigid as the parties' policies have become more alike and society has become less class-based.



Do you like the party's policies and image?

People tend to vote for the party as a whole rather than their local candidate. The image of the party and its leader has become increasingly important as the role of the media has increased.

What do your friends think?

People's decisions on who to vote for are often affected by their friends and family.

What's your religion?

Religious beliefs can persuade people to vote for the party that holds views in line with their own.

Where do you live?

Political parties often have strongholds in certain areas. For instance, in the South East more people have traditionally voted Conservative.

- 1 Select two of these factors and explain how they affect people's decision on which party to vote for.
- 2 How do you think the political parties use this information to persuade people to vote for their candidates?
- 3 Why can having lots of money help a party to win votes?

Which party?

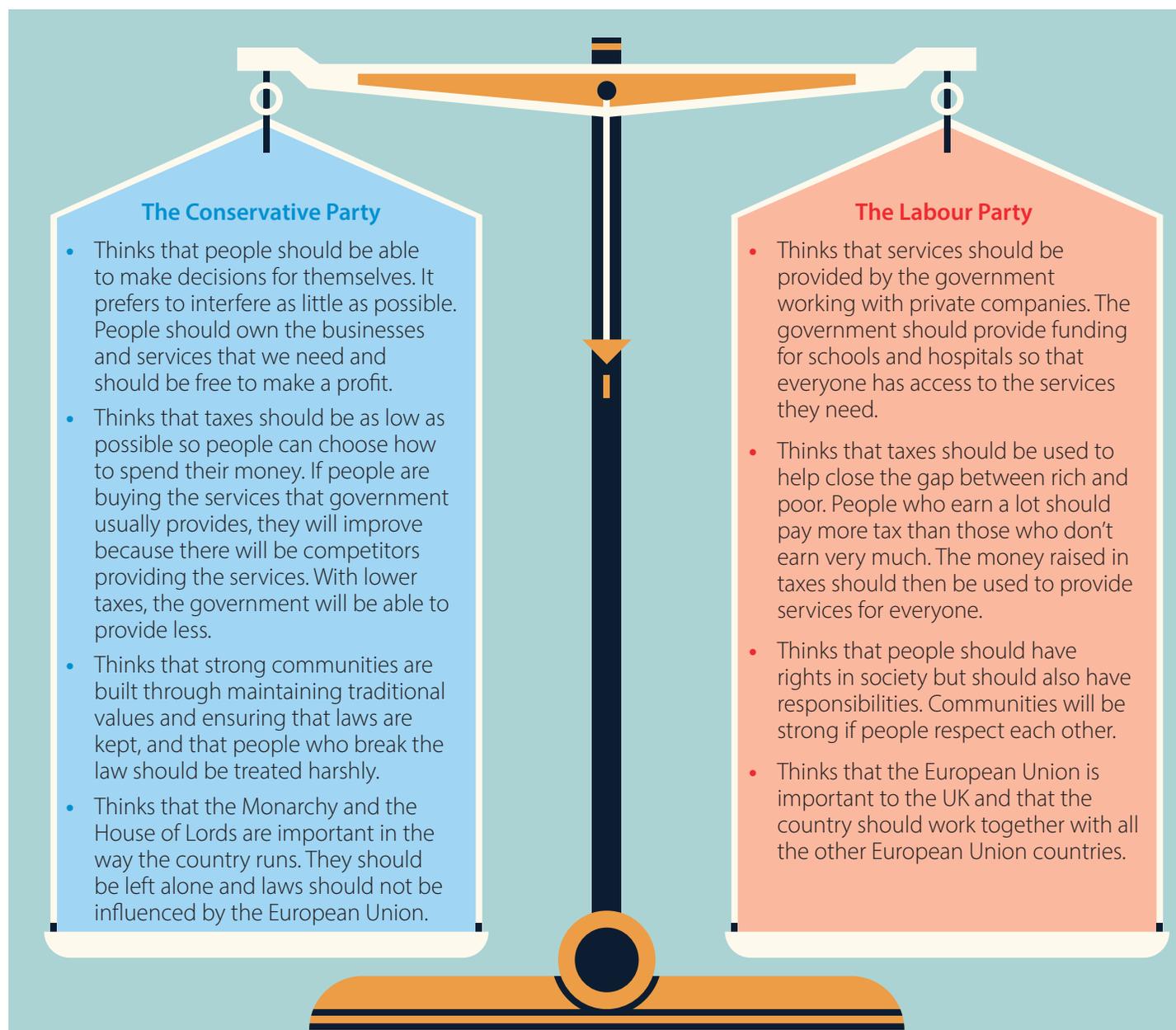
At the last general election, 61 parties put forward candidates. Some of the parties are very small or very local. They include The Pirate Party, Justice for Men and Boys, and We Are The Reality Party. None of these won a seat in Parliament. Only 11 parties won seats and the vast majority were won by just two parties, the Conservative Party and the Labour Party.

The range of parties means that there is the opportunity for many different points of view to be voiced. Freedom of speech is an important right in the UK.

The decision you make is very important because the party that is elected will run the country for the next five years. The laws that are passed and the decisions that are made about raising taxes and spending money on the services the government provides all depend on the party that is elected.

You will think about the differences between the main political parties.

What's the difference?



Actions

- Look at the Labour and Conservative parties' websites and find out more about their policies: www.labour.org.uk and www.conservatives.com
- Think carefully about which party's views you prefer and explain why. You can use the Vote for Policies website to help you work out which party has policies you agree with: <https://voteforpolitics.org.uk>

Check your understanding

- 1 How are people influenced when they vote?
- 2 What are the main features of the Labour and Conservative parties' beliefs?
- 3 Why do you think there are so many political parties in the UK?

Another point of view

'The UK only needs one political party.'

2.4 Into power

Getting you thinking

'On 8 May 2015 I became the MP for North Cornwall. On the Monday of the following week I made my first walk across Westminster Bridge and into the Houses of Parliament. It was a very special moment for me to look at the Palace of Westminster and think, 'I have changed my job from a postman in Cornwall to an MP in London.'

The Houses of Parliament are full of so much history statues of former Prime Ministers, beautiful buildings and famous MPs who I had only previously seen on television. In my own way I am now a small part of that history. It's my aim to speak up for North Cornwall and support the country and its people for as long as the people of our great nation keep electing me.'

- 1 Why was entering the House of Commons such a special moment for Scott?
- 2 What might you think if you had become an MP and entered the House of Commons for the first time?
- 3 What did Scott want to do once he had become an MP?
- 4 If you had just become an MP, what would you like to change?



Scott outside the Houses of Parliament on his first day as MP for North Cornwall

After the election

The leader of the party with the most seats will be called to see the Monarch. A question will be posed: 'Can you form a government?' If the answer is 'Yes', the leader of the winning party will become the new Prime Minister.

It is the Monarch's responsibility to appoint the new Prime Minister, but this is carried out with advice from others. The Monarch must never take sides.

Once appointed, the Prime Minister must set about selecting who will be in the **Cabinet**. These are people who run the most important work of the government. You will find out more on page 64.

Sometimes the election results are not clear and no party has a clear majority. The parties have to work out how they can work together. There may be long talks between the parties to decide which group of parties will form

the government. In 2010, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats decided to work together, so they formed a **coalition**. They had enough seats together to have a majority and could therefore form the government.

Taking your seat

For a new MP, taking your seat in the House of Commons is an exciting event. After what might be years of wanting and waiting to be elected, joining the body that runs the country is a big moment.

MPs debate new laws and policies in the House of Commons. Sometimes debates become furious and the **Speaker** has to act very firmly to keep things in order. On occasion, an MP can be temporarily thrown out of the House of Commons if things get out of hand. MPs generally vote with the party to which they belong, but sometimes they follow their conscience.

You will discover what happens after an election.

The Speaker is an MP, chosen by the rest to organise business and keep order.

Backbench MPs, who don't have jobs in the government or **opposition**, sit on benches at the back.

The government benches: the **Prime Minister** sits at the front, surrounded by the Cabinet.



The opposition benches: the Leader of the opposition sits at the front, surrounded by the **Shadow Cabinet**.

MPs who don't belong to the main party or largest opposition party also sit on the opposition bench.

Starting work

MPs have a range of responsibilities.

Their first responsibility is to the people who elected them. There is often a lot of mail from the constituency, which must be dealt with. An MP will hold a frequent 'surgery' in the constituency to listen to people's ideas and worries. They take part in debates in the House of Commons and will usually vote with their political party.

If they have a post in a government department, they will be busy working on government policy and working out new laws.

They might sit on a committee that keeps a check on the activities of the government departments.

Ministers are known as **front benchers**. Other MPs are called **back benchers** because of where they sit in the **House of Commons**.

The opposition sits facing the government. It has the same organisation as the government, with a Shadow Cabinet.

Check your understanding

1. What is the responsibility of every MP?
2. What does the Queen ask the leader of the winning party?
3. What happens if the answer is 'Yes'?
4. What is a coalition?

Another point of view

'MPs should always vote with the party they belong to.'

Key Terms

back benchers: MPs who do not hold office in the government or opposition; they sit on the back benches in the House of Commons

Cabinet: a group of MPs who head major government departments. It meets weekly to make decisions about how government policy will be carried out. Senior Ministers from the Lords are also represented

coalition: a government made of more than one party. It is formed when no one party has enough seats to form a government

front benchers: MPs who hold office in the government or opposition. They sit on the front benches in the House of Commons

House of Commons: the more powerful of the two parts of the British Parliament. Its members are elected by the public

opposition: political parties that are not in power

Prime Minister: the leader of the majority party in the House of Commons and the leader of the government

Shadow Cabinet: MPs from the main opposition party who 'shadow' MPs who head major government departments

Speaker: the MP elected to act as chairman for debates in the House of Commons

2.5 Forming a government

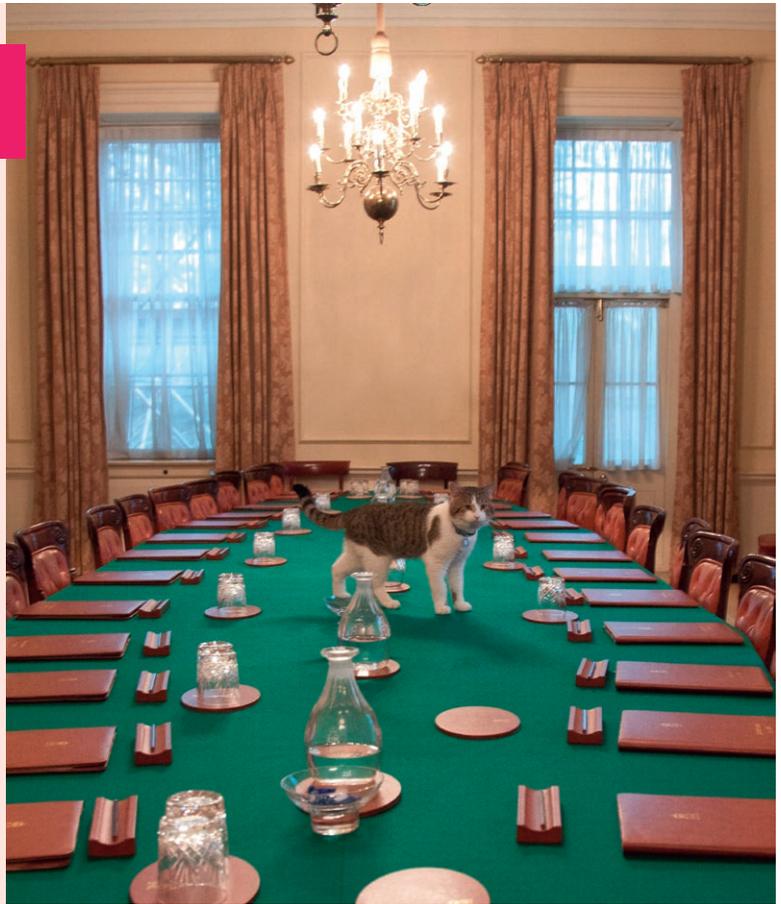
Getting you thinking

Apart from Larry, the Downing Street cat, you have to be invited by the Prime Minister to take a seat in the Cabinet.

The Cabinet is the group of MPs who lead the most important government departments such as finance, health, education and defence. The Prime Minister has to choose very carefully so the best people take the jobs.

The Cabinet meets weekly in the Cabinet Room to decide on government policy and make important decisions.

- 1 Look at the list of government departments below. Which do you think should be represented in the Cabinet?
- 2 What skills do you think a Cabinet minister should have?
- 3 If you were Prime Minister, how would you set about selecting your Cabinet?



What does the Prime Minister do?

Apart from setting up the government, the Prime Minister has several other important roles. These include:

- directing government policy
- managing the Cabinet
- organising government
- controlling Parliament
- providing national leadership.
- children, schools and families
- culture, media and sport
- business and enterprise
- environment, food and rural affairs
- transport
- international development.

The Cabinet and other ministers

The Cabinet is the inner circle of ministers. It is involved in all serious decision making. It includes:

- the Treasury, which runs the finances
- the Home Office, which is responsible for protecting the public
- the Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Office, which is responsible for the UK's interests abroad.

Other departments in the Cabinet are usually:

- health
- defence
- justice

Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland also have their own departments. The people who lead these departments are known as **Secretaries of State**. They have assistants called **Ministers of State**. There is also a range of other jobs for non-Cabinet MPs in the departments. Each department has a staff of civil servants who develop and carry out its policies.

After the election, MPs wait for a call from the Prime Minister's office, in the hope of getting a job in the government. Getting the first job in a government department is a step to becoming a Minister.

A new government

Once the government has been formed, the Prime Minister and Cabinet decide on their plans for the next five years. These are announced in the Queen's – or King's – Speech when the Monarch opens the new sitting of Parliament. The Queen or King comes to Parliament and makes the speech from the House of Lords.

The two houses

Parliament is **bi-cameral** as it has two 'houses'.

- the House of Commons, which is elected
- the House of Lords, which is both appointed and hereditary.

MPs are called to the House of Lords by **Black Rod**, who looks after the Palace of Westminster as The Houses of Parliament is known.

When Black Rod arrives at the House of Commons, the doors are slammed in his face. This is to show the independence of the House of Commons from the Monarch. Black Rod knocks three times and the MPs are allowed in to hear the speech.



Black Rod knocks on the door of the House of Commons.

Check your understanding

- 1 What does the Prime Minister do?
- 2 What do the following ministries do?
 - The Treasury
 - The Home Office
 - The Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Office
- 3 What is the difference between a Secretary of State and a Minister of State?
- 4 What does bi-cameral mean?
- 5 What do the following do?
 - The Legislature
 - The Executive
 - The Judiciary

Complete power?

The UK Prime Minister has much power but, whatever the government plans, Parliament will have its say and the Monarch has to sign it off.

The diagram below shows who does what. The Monarch sits at the top, but generally only acts on the advice of others. The roles shown in the diagram are not completely separate as they frequently work together. You will find out more on page 70.

	Monarch		
	Legislature	Executive	Judiciary
What do they do?	Makes law	Draws up and puts policy into action	Makes judgments about the law
Who is involved?	House of Commons House of Lords	Prime Minister Cabinet Civil Service	Judge and magistrates in courts

Another point of view

'The Prime Minister is too powerful. There are not enough checks on what's being done.'

Key Terms

bi-cameral: the UK Parliament is bi-cameral because it has two Houses, the House of Commons and the House of Lords

Black Rod: the person who has ceremonial duties in the Palace of Westminster, including bringing MPs to the House of Lords for the State Opening of Parliament

the executive: makes policy and puts it into practice. It is made up of the Prime Minister, Cabinet and Civil Service

the judiciary: makes judgments about the law. It is made up of judges and magistrates in courts

the legislature: makes laws. It is made up of the House of Lords and House of Commons

Minister of State: an assistant to the Secretary of State

Secretary of State: an MP who is in charge of a government department such as health or defence

2.6 How are laws made?

Getting you thinking



Climate change law: reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80 per cent by 2050.



The Community Rehabilitation Order aims to:

- ensure that the young person takes responsibility for his/her crime
- help the young person to resolve any personal difficulties that may have contributed to his/her offending
- help the young person become a law-abiding and responsible member of the community.



Smoking in cars carrying children is now illegal.



School-leaving age: from 2015, everyone will have to stay in education or training until 18.

- 1 Why do you think the government wanted to make laws like these?
- 2 What, in your opinion, would happen if the government passed laws that the population did not like?
- 3 Why do people, in general, keep the laws that are passed by Parliament?

Power

Parliament passes laws that determine how we live our lives. By electing a government, we give it the power to do this. If people break the laws, they can be punished. The government is given authority because the population accepts that an election is a fair way of deciding who will hold power for a five-year period.

The government is **accountable** because it has to answer to the voters. If voters do not like what is happening, the government will not be re-elected.

How are laws made?

Laws go through several stages before coming into force. The government often puts out a **Green Paper**, which puts forward ideas for future laws. Once the ideas have

been made final, a **White Paper** is published. This lays out the government's policy. To turn policy into law, the proposals are introduced to Parliament in the form of a **bill**. To change the school-leaving age, for example, the government would have to introduce an Education Bill. Having gone through the process shown in the diagram on the page opposite, the bill becomes an **Act of Parliament** and, therefore, part of the law of the country. The government is accountable to the population, so it needs to be sure that everyone has had an opportunity to comment.

It is important that laws are put together, or 'drafted' carefully, because there are always some people who want to find a way of avoiding them. If a law can be interpreted in a different way, it will be very hard to enforce. The law to ban hunting, for example, is proving difficult to enforce.

You will understand the process a bill goes through before it becomes law.

The debate

Most bills are introduced by the government. Sometimes the parties are in agreement and all goes smoothly, but

often the opposition seriously disagrees either on the policy as a whole or on aspects of it. This leads to lengthy debate when the opposition tries to persuade the government to accept changes – or amendments – to the bill.

Passing through Parliament

First reading

The bill is introduced formally in the House of Commons. Before it reaches this stage, it has been worked on by a drafting committee to make sure that it is put together correctly. A bill can be many pages long. At this stage there is no debate.

Second reading

A few weeks after the first reading stage, the bill is debated fully in the House of Commons. A vote is taken and, if the majority of MPs approve of the bill, it is passed.

Standing committee

A group of 16 to 20 MPs looks at the bill carefully and makes any alterations that came up at the second reading, or which they now think are appropriate.

House of Lords

The bill goes through the same process as in the Commons. If the Lords want to change anything, the bill is returned to the Commons.

Third reading

The amended bill is presented to the House of Commons. A debate is held and a vote is taken on whether to approve it.

Report stage

The committee sends a report to the House of Commons with all its amendments. These amendments are either approved or changed. Changes are made when there is a lot of opposition to the bill or if there is strong public pressure to make changes.

Royal assent

Once the bill has passed all its stages in the Commons and the Lords, it is sent to the Queen for her signature. This is really a formality, as the Queen would never refuse to sign a bill that had been through the democratic process. The bill then becomes an Act of Parliament and part of the law of the country.

Action

Choose a new law that you would like to see passed. Put your proposals into a 'bill'. Work out what the opposition is likely to say and prepare your arguments.

Check your understanding

- 1 What is the difference between a bill and an Act?
- 2 What sort of things do committees have to pay attention to when making amendments to bills?
- 3 Why do you think there are so many stages before a law is made?

Key Terms

accountable: if you are accountable for something, you are responsible for it and have to explain your actions

Act of Parliament: a law passed by Parliament

bill: a proposal to change something into law

Green Paper: this puts forward ideas that the government wants discussed before it starts to develop a policy

White Paper: this puts government policy up for discussion before it becomes law

2.7 Apart or together?

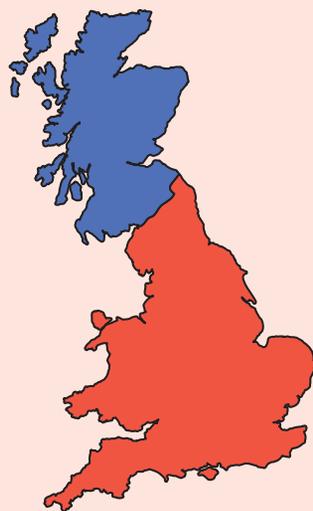
Getting you thinking

Here are two views on how to vote in the 2014 referendum on Scotland's independence.

Yes!

'A "Yes" vote means we can choose to have power over our country's future – and make Scotland a better place to live for all of us.

Even our opponents agree that Scotland has what it takes to be a successful independent country. An independent Scotland would be among the 20 wealthiest nations in the world. But we need independence to make that wealth work better for the people who live here by creating more and better jobs.'



No!

'A "No" vote will mean a better future for my kids. They will have more job opportunities and better funding for schools and hospitals.

Most people I have talked to think that devolution has been a success. The decisions made in Scotland are guaranteed because of our links with England. There is the power to raise money for our NHS, to help people back to work, and look after welfare. We can have progress in Scotland without the risks of separation.'

- 1 Set out the two arguments for and against Scottish independence.
- 2 What is the difference between devolution and independence?
- 3 Do you think Scotland should become independent?

Devolution

The Scottish Parliament and Welsh **Assembly** were both set up following referenda in 1998. There had been lengthy campaigns for **devolution** in both countries. People wanted devolution because it shifted some power and authority from London to their own capital cities.

The extent to which power is shared with Westminster varies according to the strength of the vote in the referendum in each country.



The Scottish Parliament chamber

Scotland voted strongly for its Parliament, which has the ability to raise taxes and pass laws. There are constant debates about how much power the Parliament should have. This was brought to a head in a referendum in 2014 when the Scots were asked if they wanted independence. The vote was narrowly lost but the Scottish Parliament was given considerably more power over taxation, elections and social policy such as drugs and drink driving.

The powers of the Scottish Parliament:

- agriculture, fisheries and forestry
- economic development
- education
- environment
- food standards
- health
- home affairs
- law – courts, police, fire services
- local government and statistics
- research and statistics
- social work
- sport and the arts
- tourism
- training
- transport.

You will explore the changing views on devolution and independence in the UK



The Welsh Assembly chamber

The **Welsh** voted by a narrow margin of 0.6 per cent for their Assembly. The Welsh Assembly can spend the UK government's allocation of money to Wales, but it cannot set taxes and has limited law-making powers.

Northern Ireland's Assembly was set up in 1998 but has often been suspended because of disagreement among Irish politicians. The current Assembly has powers to control education, health, local government, policing and justice.

There are calls for regional assemblies in the rest of the UK too. Many people in regions such as Cornwall feel that their part of the country is distinctive and has different needs from the rest of the UK. People in the North East, however, rejected the idea when a referendum was held. The cost of running a regional assembly was one factor in their decision.

The effect of the changes

The more powers that are transferred to the Scottish Parliament, the more some people in England want to change the way Scottish MPs vote in Westminster. They question whether Scottish MPs should be allowed to vote on issues that affect only England, since English MPs can't vote on the same issues in Scotland.

Check your understanding

- 1 What is the purpose of a referendum? When is one held?
- 2 What is devolution?
- 4 What's the difference in the amount of power held by the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly?
- 5 Why do some Scottish people want independence?
- 6 Why do some people want to have regional governments?

Action

The Scottish referendum on independence resulted in the decision to stay in the UK. There was, however, still pressure for change. Check up on what is happening and how the powers of the Scottish Parliament are changing.

Another point of view

'Devolution means that better decisions are made for a region because they are made locally.'

Key Terms

Assembly: a body of people elected to decide on some areas of spending in a region
devolution: the transfer of power from central to regional government

2.8 How are we governed?

Getting you thinking



Before Magna Carta, the Monarch had complete control over what happened in the country. King John was forced to sign Magna Carta and hand over some power to the barons. This was the beginning of the British constitution.

- 1 What might happen today if there were no rules about the actions of the Monarch or Prime Minister?
- 2 Why is trust not enough?
- 3 Think of examples of what happens in countries where leaders do not accept the country's constitution – if there is one.

What is the British constitution?

The **British constitution** sets out how we are governed. Many countries have a written constitution, but the UK's is not written down. It is a set of rules which lay down how much power the government has, when elections must be held and the influence the Monarch can have.

It all comes from a number of sources, which together tell us how the country should be run.

The British constitution is not set in stone. As the law changes, it is incorporated into the constitution. Membership of the European Union has meant that laws passed by the European Parliament affect British Law. Devolution within the UK also changes the way our Parliament works.

Parliamentary sovereignty

Parliamentary sovereignty is the most important part of the Constitution. It means that Parliament is the chief source of law in the UK. The government must be drawn from Parliament and it cannot pass laws that can't be changed by future Parliaments.

Conventions tell us a range of things that have developed over time – for example, that the Prime Minister should be in the House of Commons. This was not always the case.

Common law is made by judges. When they make decisions in court they sometimes change the law. See page 67.

European law affects the UK as a member of the European Union.

Statute law is law that has been passed by Parliament over a long period. These laws start with Magna Carta and, in more recent times, include Britain's joining the European Community, devolution when the Scottish Parliament was set up, and the introduction of the Human Rights Act.



Are there checks and balances on Parliament?

The way that the branches of government are kept separate means that each one keeps a check on the others. On page 65, you learned about the legislature, executive and judiciary, which set out these three areas of government and why it is important that they are independent.

Judicial review is a further check. A court's decision can be challenged if it is suspected that it has not been properly made. Here are some examples of the sort of decisions that are challenged:

- local government decisions about welfare benefits and special education
- immigration decisions about whether people can stay in the country
- decisions about prisoners' rights.

Select committees also check up on the work of Parliament. Every government department has a select committee that watches over the decisions it makes. They gather evidence and produce reports. Each department has 60 days to reply to the comments of its select committee.

Parliamentary inquiries can be requested if there is concern that the government isn't doing something properly. The Children's Society, for example, requested an enquiry on the care of children of asylum seekers. The report it produced gave advice to the government on changes that should be made.

Judicial review: Snibston Discovery Museum

Leicester County Council decided to close the Snibston Discovery Museum because it said it could no longer afford to run it.

The Friends of Snibston Museum really wanted to keep the museum open. They asked for a judicial review. They said that the consultation the council had carried out was not good enough. The question that had been asked made it hard for people to disagree with closing the museum, so it had not been done properly. The judge agreed that the judicial review should go ahead. When it did, the verdict was that the Council was right and the museum could close.



Check your understanding

- 1 What is the British constitution?
- 2 What makes up the British constitution?
- 3 Are there checks and balances on the government? What are they?
- 4 Explain how a judicial review works.

Another point of view

'The government has been elected by everyone so must not be challenged.'

Key Terms

British constitution: the laws and conventions which set down how the UK is governed

judicial review: a review carried out by the High Court to decide whether a decision made by a public body has been made properly

Parliamentary inquiry: an enquiry set up to investigate actions taken by government departments and public bodies

Parliamentary sovereignty: Parliament is the top legal body and can pass new laws or stop old laws

select committee: one of the committees that check and report on the work of government departments

2.9 Balancing the budget

Getting you thinking

My mum got a grant to go to university but I'm going to end up with enormous debts.



I live on my own and I haven't any children. Why should I pay all these taxes for schools and the elderly?



I just can't make ends meet. Why can't the government give us enough pension to live on?



I've tried and tried to get another job. I just reckon I'm too old. They think I'm not trying and say my benefits will be cut.

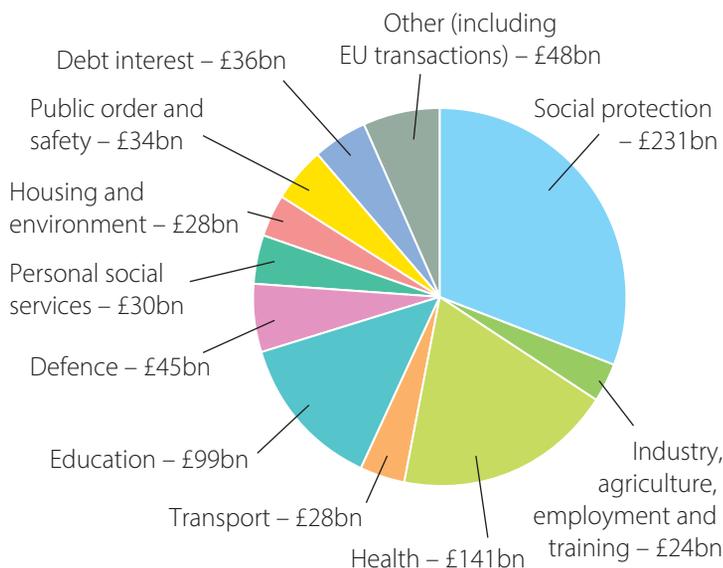


- 1 What are these people worried about?
- 2 Make a list of the areas of spending which the questions refer to.
- 3 Where do you think the money comes from to pay for all these services?
- 4 Do you think there is a limit to the amount the government can spend? Why?
- 5 How should the government decide how to spend its money?

What does the government spend?

The government spends its money on a wide range of services. The pie chart below shows the main areas of spending and the proportion spent on each area. The way it is divided up varies a little from year to year but the overall picture stays much the same.

Total managed expenditure: £742 billion

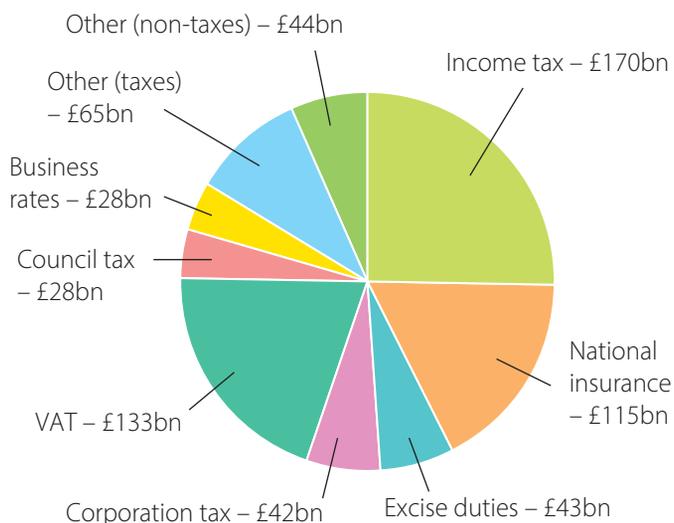


Source: HM Treasury

Where does the money come from?

If the government is to provide these services, it needs to raise money to pay for them. The money, or **government revenue**, comes from taxation or borrowing, as the pie chart below shows.

Total revenue: £673 billion



Source: HM Treasury

You will find out that the government has to make choices when it spends the money it raises in taxes.

What taxes?



Making ends meet

The decisions on taxes and spending happen each year in the **Budget**. The **Chancellor of the Exchequer** is responsible for deciding where the money comes from and how it is spent. The Chancellor works with government departments to decide what is needed and what must come first. It can be difficult to get the right balance, because often every department will want to spend more.

Just like everyone else, if the government wants to spend more than its income, it has to borrow money. When it borrows, it has to pay interest to the people who lend it the money. When the Chancellor makes decisions on the amount of tax raised, expenditure and borrowing, the risks involved have to be weighed up.

Over the years, there has been a steady increase in the amount that governments spend. At the moment, it amounts to about £10 000 per person, per year. People's voting decisions often depend on what the political parties say they will do about taxes and spending if they win the election.

Check your understanding

- 1 What does the Chancellor of the Exchequer do? Why can this work be difficult?
- 2 Explain the different types of taxation that the government uses to raise money.
- 3 What has been happening to the amount of government spending over the years?
- 4 Why might government spending influence the way people vote?

Action

The Treasury is the government department responsible for the Budget. Look at its website at <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-treasury> to find out how the government raises and spends its money. Click on the 'Budget' heading on the site. You will find documents that explain the government's spending decisions.

Another point of view

'If the NHS wants more money, it should get it.'

Key Terms

Budget: the process each year when the Chancellor of the Exchequer explains how the government will raise and spend its money

Chancellor of the Exchequer: the member of the government who is responsible for the country's finances

government revenue: the money raised by the government

2.10 Bringing it all together

Source A

The future of the UK

In September 2014, people in Scotland were asked whether they wanted to become independent from the UK. They voted in a referendum, which had a very high turnout. The result was that 45 per cent voted to leave the UK and 55 per cent voted to stay.

In order to persuade Scottish people to vote to stay, the UK government gave Scotland greater powers over its own affairs. The powers included taxation, elections and social policy such as drugs and drink driving.

The interest in the Scottish referendum led to people in Wales wanting more powers. They already have an Assembly but feel like second-class citizens when compared with the Scots. The UK parliament suggested that more powers would be transferred to Wales as a result.

1. Which term is used to describe the transfer of powers to Scotland? (1 mark)

- Proportional representation
- Devolution
- Integration
- Advocacy

2. Give one advantage and one disadvantage of using a referendum to make decisions. (2 marks)

Advantage: A referendum gives a clear answer on a single question.

Disadvantage: It cannot not be used for every decision a government has to make.

3. Source A discusses the transfer of powers from the UK parliament to Scotland. Explain how the transfer of powers to the countries that make up the UK affects England. (6 marks)

As the countries of the UK have more power to make decisions in their own parliament and assemblies, there will be less power in the Westminster parliament.

If the other countries can decide how much tax to raise, Westminster will raise less taxes and have less to spend. They may have different priorities, so the countries will become more different.

The student is looking at the implications of the change.

At the moment, there is a point of view in England that MPs from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should not be able to vote at Westminster on issues that only affect England, as English MPs have no say on the decisions made in the other countries.

This shows up-to-date knowledge related to the topic.

As Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have the power to make decisions, there may be demand for other regions of the UK to make decisions for themselves. This would reduce the power of Westminster further.

Issues and debates

Source B

Electoral reform: Labour List

In the most disproportionate election result in modern British electoral history, on 7 May 2015, the Conservative Party received 36.9 per cent of the vote and 51 per cent of the seats in Parliament. This caused urgent calls for electoral reform. There is widespread dissatisfaction with first past the post among the public. The Labour Party is especially dissatisfied as it gained votes, but lost seats. A commitment to reform a voting system which clearly does not reflect the preferences of millions of voters would be a wise decision. It would appeal to Green, former Liberal Democrat and especially UKIP voters, all of whose support will be key to winning in 2020.

Source: Adapted from Labour List

Source C

Electoral reform: David Cameron, Conservative Prime Minister

Don't take all this from me. You can judge the relative merits of first past the post and AV, a form of proportional representation, by how popular they are overseas.

Our current system is one of Britain's most successful exports – used by almost half the electors on the planet, embraced and understood by 2.4 billion people from India to America.

So in the next few days ask yourself a few questions: do you want to switch to a voting system that is hopelessly unclear, unfair and indecisive?

Do you want elections that are – as Churchill put it – 'determined by the most worthless votes given for the most worthless candidates'?

And do you want to rip up a valuable part of our constitution and centuries of British history for a system that is unpopular the world over? If the answer is no, make sure you get out to the polling station on 7 May – and vote no to AV.

3. Analyse the sources to identify two views which the writers disagree about. (2 marks)

That first past the post is the most popular way of electing people to government.

That first past the post is the fairest way to elect MPs.

4. Which writer do you agree with more? Explain your answer, referring to the arguments made in both sources. (12 marks)

I agree that the electoral system should be reformed. The first source shows that the 2015 election was very unfair and the number of votes did not reflect the number of seats that parties won. The Labour Party gained votes but lost seats. The Conservatives won 36.9 per cent of the votes but 51 per cent of the seats in Parliament. Other parties won votes but have very few MPs.

The student is using the material from the source to support their point of view.

Proportional representation means that the number of votes for any party is much closer to the number of seats they end up with in Parliament.

This shows that the student understands how proportional representation works.

David Cameron describes proportional representation as 'hopelessly unclear, unfair and indecisive'. It can take longer to get a result because votes have to be counted several times in order to work out how many MPs each party would have. It doesn't seem unfair to me as the number of votes and seats are much fairer. It can be seen as being indecisive because smaller parties usually get more seats – so there is more likely to be a coalition government. Some people think this is an advantage because it means that large parties have to compromise on their policies.

David Cameron also regards small parties as 'worthless'. In a democracy, everyone is entitled to their opinion – and their vote should count.

Also, just because things have been running for a long time, it doesn't mean that it is right.

There is good evidence in the first source that proportional representation (PR) is a better way of electing people to Parliament. Because first past the post benefits large parties with representation across the country, they are likely to support keeping it because they will not want to give away their advantage.

The student is using their understanding of the concepts to support their point of view and come to a conclusion.

Extended writing

When money is limited, the government must make cuts in all services, however necessary.

How far do you agree with this view?

Give reasons for your opinion, showing that you have considered other points of view.

In your answer, you could consider:

- government spending
- the effect of changes in spending

The government spends a great deal of money every year on a wide range of things we need. This includes health, education, social services, defence and transport as well as looking after the environment and our relations with other countries. There are government departments that run each of these services. The Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Treasury will make the decision about how much is spent on each one.

This shows that the student understands how the system works and who makes the decisions.

Different amounts of money are spent on all these things to meet our needs. The biggest are health, education and social services. The problem about this view is how to decide on what is necessary. Schools and the National Health Service are obviously necessary because

people and families need these more at different stages of their lives. People who are old need pensions. Some people in the community need support because they have a disability and are unable to work. We all need a good transport network if we are to get to work or school. Businesses need it too if they are going to get things they make to their destination. There are good reasons not to make any cuts but this is not always possible.

The student raises the key problem here – what is necessary?

Different political parties have different views on what is necessary so the decisions that are made will depend on which party is in power. The Conservative Party tends to think that people should look after themselves. The Labour Party is more prepared to accept responsibility for looking after people who need care.

The student is demonstrating that they understand how different parties are likely to make different decisions.

When making the decisions about how much to spend on each service, a party will think about the effect it will have on voters. Making cuts that affect a party's own supporters is unlikely to be popular – so the Chancellor of the Exchequer will think carefully about such decisions. In a recent budget, the chancellor made cuts that affected the poor and gave tax cuts to the rich. There was a storm of protest and the government had to change its mind.

Good use of a current example as evidence to support the argument.

Now we have fixed terms for elections, it is easier for the government to make such plans as they will know how many more budgets there will be before the election. If governments have to cut spending, they are more likely to do it when the next election is a long way away and to then spend more just before an election, so people feel better off when they come to vote.

This shows a good understanding of the how elections can influence the decisions a government makes.

In my opinion, the government should look at the groups of people who need support the most and make the smallest cuts in the services that they need. Some things can be put off until later when there is more money available.

There are some things, like the money spent on international development, that have been protected. The United Nations set a figure that countries should contribute and the British government has aimed to keep to this. Even when things are difficult here, there are people in other countries who are worse off than us and we should help them.

By looking at spending from this point of view, the government is likely to make fairer decisions.

The student clearly has a good understanding of government spending and this improves the quality of their argument.