

The structure of Government United Kingdom



UK overview

Population 66 million¹
Population per sq km 275²

Government expenditure
as % of GDP 39%³

Place in World League

People's trust in government ⁴	23	(41%)
People's satisfaction with life ⁵	18	(68%)
GDP per capita ⁶	22	
Legatum Prosperity Index ⁷	7	
Freedom in the world ⁸	23	

Note: all data in this report are pre-2020 to exclude the effects of Covid-19

Governance overview

The United Kingdom is structured according to a classical separation of legislative, executive and legal powers: Parliament, the executive and the judiciary, with a ceremonial Monarch as head of state. There are five levels of governance.

Electoral system

The UK uses five electoral systems.

- First-past-the-post is used to elect MPs to the House of Commons and for local elections in England and Wales.
- A Single Transferable Vote system for the Northern Ireland Assembly and for local elections in Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- A Supplementary Vote system is used for some elected mayors.
- A proportional representation system is used to elect the Scottish Parliament, and the Welsh and London Assemblies.

Direction of devolution

Top-down.

- Powers cannot be transferred to lower tier of government without primary legislation from Westminster.
- The Secretary of State must approve the model of local government - a mayor and cabinet executive, a committee system or other system. However, local people can call for a referendum⁹ to decide which model to adopt.
- The independent Local Government Boundary Commission for England decides the number of councillors that each local authority will have.

Parliament is technically able to pass laws for any part of the UK, but in practice, it only deals with devolved matters with the agreement of the National governments.

Political style

UK government has been dominated by two major parties, which is often attributed to the first-past-the-post voting system. However, recent polling and the European elections suggest that the system may be fragmenting, with smaller parties gaining a greater share of the votes.

Income equalisation¹⁰

Revenue is redistributed to Nations using block (the Barnett formula) and mandated grants.

Unusual features

Unlike most modern states, Britain does not have a codified constitution but an unwritten one formed of Acts of Parliament, court judgments and conventions.

England, which contains around 85% of the UK's population is governed directly by the UK Parliament. This allows Scottish and Welsh MPs to vote on matters that only affect England, whereas English MPs cannot vote on matters which only affect Scotland or Wales.

The UK has the third highest level of fiscal centralisation of the OECD countries.

United Kingdom Parliament

Governance

Parliament consists of two chambers: the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Members of the Commons (MPs) are elected by the citizens and members of the House of Lords are appointed by the government or, in a minority of cases, inherited their peerages.

Parliament	Commons	Lords
Members	650	778 (not fixed)
Population per member	100,000	85,000
Full or part time	full time	part time
Pay ratio to national average wage	2.8	variable
Weeks of sittings per year	20-22	20-22

Elections

Electorate	national	-
Frequency	5 years	-
Turnout last time ¹¹	69%	-

Legislation process¹²

The government or Member of Parliament can introduce a Bill.

Bills are read three times before the vote. Once a Bill has been debated and approved in both Chambers, it is presented to the Monarch for Royal Assent.

Responsibilities

Benefits and social security, broadcasting, coal, consumer rights, data protection, defence, education, employment, foreign policy, gas and electricity, health, immigration, infrastructure, nuclear energy, oil, policing, trade and industry.

Expenditure as % of

spent at central government level 66%¹³

Source of funds¹⁴

Raised locally 100%

Who decides

Tax type: Central Government

Tax rates: Central Government

Who collects tax

Central government (HMRC)

National Governments – Scotland, Wales, N Ireland

Devolution

Devolution of responsibilities to Nations – Scotland, Wales and N Ireland – was started by the Blair government and continued under Cameron's. However, as the data below shows this seems to have been done piece meal, resulting in great disparities.

The greatest disparity is England, which contains around 85% of the UK's population, but does not have its own governing body or any devolved powers. It is governed directly by UK Parliament. Scottish and Welsh MPs are allowed to vote on matters that only affect England, whereas, English MPs are barred from voting on Scottish or Welsh matters.

Governance

Nations are a level below UK Parliament. The Scottish Parliament, and the Welsh and N Ireland Assemblies are established by Acts of Parliament.

Nations	England	Scotland	Wales	N Ireland
Population, millions	56	5.5	3.1	1.8

Nation's governments

Members		129	60	90
Population per member		42,000	52,000	21,000
Full or part time		full time	full time	full time
Pay ratio to national average wage		2.7	2.2	3
Weeks of sittings per year		20-22	20-22	20-22

Elections

Electorate		Nation	Nation	Nation
Frequency		4 years	4-5 years	5 years
Turnout last time		56%	65%	45%

Legislation process

The Nation's processes are very similar to those of the UK Parliament.

The Northern Ireland Assembly is currently in a period of suspension, after it collapsed in January 2017.

Responsibilities

Scotland, Wales, N Ireland broadly: agriculture, culture, economic development, education environment, employment, equal opportunities, forestry & fisheries,

housing, health, justice & policing, pensions, planning, rural affairs, social services, sport, tourism and transport.

	Scotland	Wales	N Ireland
Expenditure as % of			
total government expenditure	9%	4%	2%

Main taxes

Income tax, non-domestic rates, landfill tax, property tax. Aggregates levies will soon be devolved.

Source of funds

Raised locally	40%	8%	8%
Block grants	60%	88%	90%
Mandated grants	-	5%	2%

Who decides

Tax type: UK Parliament

Tax rates: mostly set by UK Parliament, but Nations can vary the rates for:

Scotland income tax, non-domestic rates, land tax, landfill tax

Wales non-domestic rates, land tax, landfill tax

N Ireland non-domestic and domestic rates

Who collects tax

HMRC, Revenue Scotland & the Welsh Revenue Authority.

Sub-Nation governance overview

Governance

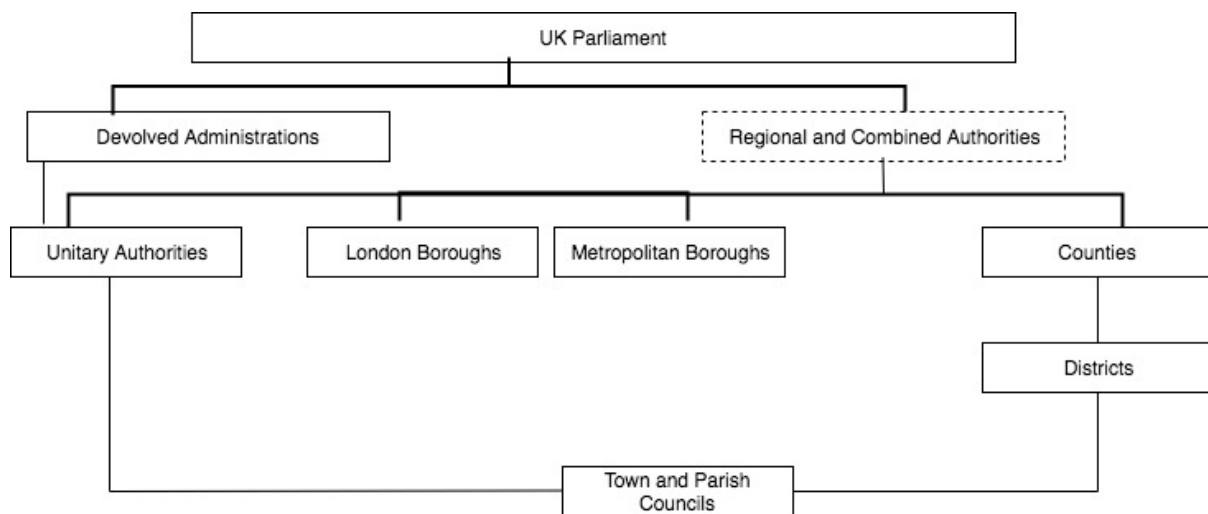
The organisation of sub-nation government is the responsibility of governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and of the UK Parliament for England.

However,

- Powers cannot be transferred to lower tier of government without primary legislation from Westminster.
- The Secretary of State must approve the model of local government - a mayor and cabinet executive, a committee system or other system. However, local people can call for a referendum¹⁵ to decide which model to adopt.
- The independent Local Government Boundary Commission for England decides the number of councillors that each local authority will have.

This has resulted in a wide variety of different forms of local government councils across the UK - unitary or two-tier systems; councils for regions, counties, unitary authorities, metropolitan districts, boroughs, and parishes.¹⁶

Some have a mayor and cabinet executive, others a committee system or formats which must be approved by the Secretary of State. Local people can have a say on the governance model adopted by their local authority via a referendum.¹⁷



Elections

Electorate: all members of governing bodies are elected by the community they serve with the exception of the 8 non-statutory Regions where representatives are appointed by the participating councils.

Legislation process¹⁸

The process is similar to all sub-national governments. Any member may put forward a motion, which must be seconded, before it is discussed at a Council Meeting. It needs to be approved by a majority of councillors to be passed.

Once a by-law has been passed by a council, it must be sent to the relevant central government department for vetting.

Regional & Combined Authorities

Governance

English Regional Authorities are a level below UK Parliament. England is subdivided into nine Regions, but only one has a statutory body, the Greater London Authority, which has an elected Assembly and Mayor.

Combined Authorities: some Councils have voluntarily pooled resources. A number have directly elected Metro Mayors, but councillors are appointed by participating authorities.

Greater London Authority

Governance

The Greater London Authority, also known as City Hall, is the devolved regional governance body of London, with jurisdiction over both counties of Greater London and the City of London. It consists of two political branches: the executive Mayoralty and the 25-member London Assembly, which serves as a means of checks and balances on the former.

London Assembly

Members	25
Population per member	353,000
Full or part time	full time
Pay ratio to national average wage	1.9
Weeks of sitting per year	20-22

Elections

Electorate	Greater London & City of London
Frequency	4 years
Turnout last time	46%

Legislation process¹⁹

The government or Member of Parliament can introduce a Bill.

Bills are read three times before the vote. Once a Bill has been debated and approved in both Chambers, it is presented to the Monarch for Royal Assent.

Responsibilities

Fire brigade housing, highways, police, strategic planning, transport.

Expenditure as % of²⁰

total government expenditure	0.7%
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Main Tax

Council tax and business rates

Source of funds²¹

Raised locally 100%

Who decides

Tax type: Central government

Tax rates: London Assembly

Who collects tax

London boroughs

Unitary authorities

Governance

Unitary authorities are a level below devolved Nations and English Regions. In practice, they are a level below UK Parliament as the regions, except for the GLA, have only been used for statistical purposes since 2011.

Typically they are formed around cities and large towns or small counties.

Unitary authorities	average	high	low
Number	55		
Population	230,000	600,000	40,000

Unitary authorities (England)²²

Members	55	126	16
Population per member	4,000	6,600	1,500
Full or part time	part & full time		
Pay ratio to national average wage	varies		

Elections

Frequency 4 years or a third of councillors every year or half of the councillors every two years

Average turnout²³ 35%

Responsibilities²⁴

Education, environmental health, highways, housing, leisure and recreation, libraries, local taxation collection, passenger transport, planning applications, social care, strategic planning
transport planning, waste collection and waste disposal.

Expenditure as % of
total government expenditure 6%²⁵

Main Taxes

Council Tax, business rates

Source of funds²⁶

Raised locally	37%
Block grants	52%
Mandated grants	11%

Who decides

Tax type: UK government

Tax rates: Unitary Authorities but raises above 2% must be approved by a referendum

Who collects tax

Unitary authorities

English Metropolitan Boroughs

Governance

Metropolitan Boroughs are a level below UK Parliament, except for London Boroughs which are a level below the Greater London Authority. They often pool much of their authority in joint boards or form Combined Authorities.

Boroughs	average	high	low
Number	68		
Population	270,000	1,100,000	150,000

English Metropolitan & London Borough Councils²⁷

Members	62	101	45
Population per member	4,400	11,000	3,500
Full or part time	part & full time		
Pay ratio to national average wage	varies		

Elections

Electorate	local
Frequency	1-4 years
Average turnout ²⁸	38%

Responsibilities²⁹

Education, environmental health, highways, housing, leisure and recreation, libraries, passenger transport, planning applications, social care, strategic planning, transport planning, waste collection, waste disposal.

The Greater London Authority, rather than individual boroughs, is responsible for highways, transport planning, passenger transport and strategic planning.

Expenditure as % of
total government expenditure 12 %³⁰

Main taxes
Council Tax, business rates

Source of funds³¹

Raised locally	37%
Block grants	37%
Mandated grants	26%

Who decides
Tax type: UK government
Tax rates: Boroughs but raises above 2% must be approved by a referendum

Who collects tax
Boroughs

English County Councils

Governance
County councils are a level below Regions. In practice, they are a level below UK Parliament as all regions, except the GLA, are not functioning .

Counties	average	high	low
Number	26		
Population	840,000	1,600,000	500,000

County Councils³²

Members	63	84	43
Population per member	13,000	22,000	7,000
Full or part time	part & full time		
Pay ratio to national average wage	varies		

Elections

Electorate	local
Frequency	4 years or a third of councillors every year or half councillors every two years
Average turnout ³³	35%

Responsibilities³⁴

Education, highways, libraries, passenger transport, social care, strategic planning, transport planning and waste disposal.

Expenditure as % of

total government expenditure 10 %³⁵

Main taxes

Council Tax, Business rates

Source of funds³⁶

Raised locally	37%
Block grants	52%
Mandated grants	11%

Who decides

Tax type: UK government

Tax rates: County Councils but raises above 2% must be approved by a referendum

Who collects tax

District councils collect council tax on behalf of the County Council

English District Councils

Governance

District councils are the level below County Councils.

Districts	average	high	low
Number	192		
Population	100,000	225,000	50,000

District Councils

Members (England) ³⁷	52	82	26
Population per member	3,000	5,000	1,300
Full or part time	part & full time		
Pay ratio to national average wage	varies		

Elections

Electorate	local
Frequency ³⁸	2 years
Turnout	35% ³⁹

Responsibilities

Car parking, culture, council tax, economic development, environmental health, housing, planning, tourism and waste management.

Expenditure as a % of⁴⁰

total government expenditure	2%
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Main taxes

Council tax, business rates

Source of funds⁴¹:

raised locally	39%
block grants	54%
mandated grants	7%

Who decides

Tax type: UK government

Tax rates: District council but raises above 2% must be approved by a referendum

Who collects tax

District councils, who also collect council tax on behalf of the County Council.

Town & Parish Councils

Governance

Parish councils are the level below Unitary Authorities and English District Councils.

Towns & Parishes	average	high	low
Number	10,000		
Population	no available data		

Town & Parish Councils

Members (England) ⁴²	10
Population per councillor ⁴³	160
Full or part time	part & full time
Pay ratio to national average wage	varies

Elections

Electorate	local
Frequency	4 years

Legislation process

Parishes with fewer than 200 electors can take on the role of a parish council, with statutory powers, and can elect a chairman and clerk for meetings. All the electors in a civil parish are entitled to attend parish meetings.

Larger parishes operate through a parish council. The council must hold an annual meeting and at least three other meetings in a year. However, monthly meetings are the most common, and some larger councils have fortnightly meetings.

Responsibilities

Allotments, bridleways, burial grounds, bus shelters, car parks, commons and open spaces, community transport schemes, community safety and crime reduction measures, events and festivals, footpaths, leisure and sports facilities, litter bins, public toilets, planning, street cleaning and lighting, tourism activities, traffic calming measures, village greens and youth projects.

Expenditure as a % of

total government expenditure	0.1%
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Source of funds⁴⁴:

raised locally	-
block grants from district councils	100%
mandated grants	-

Main taxes

Council tax

Who decides

Tax type: UK government

Tax rates: District and parish council. Unlike county and district councils, parish councils do not have to hold a referendum to increase tax rates by more than 2%.

Who collects tax

District councils

Further reading

The Barnett formula: Briefing Paper – The House of Commons:

<https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7386>

Local Government Facts and Figures- LGiU:

<https://www.lgiu.org.uk/local-government-facts-and-figures/#how-does-a-council-work>

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² <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/en.pop.dnst>

³ https://obr.uk/economy_categories/gdp-by-expenditure/

⁴ <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933533606>

⁵ <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/life-satisfaction/>

⁶ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>

⁷ <https://www.prosperity.com/globe/germany>

⁸ Freedom House

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-government-structure-and-elections>

¹⁰ <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7386>

¹¹ <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7979>

¹² <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/national-parliaments/germany.php>

¹³ Government at a Glance 2017 - © OECD 2017 – figure includes social security payments which are administered at federal level and are among the highest of the OECD nations

¹⁴<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/governmentpublicsectorandtaxes/publicsectorfinance/bulletins/publicsectorfinances/march2019#how-much-is-the-public-sector-borrowing>

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-government-structure-and-elections>

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¹⁹ <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/national-parliaments/germany.php>

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²¹ <https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/mayors-final-budget-2019-20.pdf>

²² <http://www.lgbce.org.uk/resources/electoral-data>

²³ researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8060/CBP-8060.pdf

²⁴ <https://www.politics.co.uk/reference/local-government-structure>

²⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/local-authority-revenue-expenditure-and-financing-england-2017-to-2018-individual-local-authority-data-outturn>

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