How does Parliament give people a voice in lawmaking?

Giving everyone opportunities to have a say is an important part of democracy. Parliament recognises that, when it is making decisions, there must be ways that people affected by those decisions can make their opinions and ideas heard. This is particularly important when new laws are being put forward.

One way that people can be heard is by making submissions to select committees.

Before any bill becomes law, it needs to be looked at carefully to make sure that it will work as it’s meant to and that it will be fair to all New Zealanders. This job is too big to be carried out in the House, so it is given to a smaller group of members of Parliament who are selected for the purpose: a “select committee”.

When considering the bill, the members of the committee invite other people (from inside and outside Parliament) to give their views, knowledge, and expertise. Any member of the public can put forward a submission.
What is a select committee?

Much of Parliament’s detailed discussion and scrutiny happens in select committees. Each committee usually consists of members from across the House. The number of seats each party has on all select committees is proportional to the number of seats it has in the House. This means parties with more members will have a greater say across all the committees.

Select committees are set up after each general election. There are about 13 committees that cover major areas of the Government’s work, such as finance, justice, education, and health. Other committees regulate how Parliament’s work is done, for example, reviewing the Standing Orders (the rules of Parliament). Select committees allow people to have a say in Parliament and provide opinion and information that can affect the final draft of a new law. Because the process is public, it helps to keep the work of Parliament open and transparent. Select committees give all the people of New Zealand the chance to work directly with Parliament. They make sure that a variety of points of view are heard and that new laws are effective and representative.

What does a select committee do?

Select committees carry out the detailed work that can be done more easily by small groups of MPs. Mostly, this involves scrutinising bills (looking very closely at what they say) and receiving submissions and advice. Committees then report back to the House with their recommendations. Select committees also:

• Recommend changes to the Government’s spending plans.
• Review the finances and activities of parliamentary and government organisations.
• Look at petitions and report back to the House.
• Inquire into issues of public concern.

What happens in a select committee?

After a bill has been given its first reading, it is usually sent to a select committee. For example, if the bill is about a health issue, it will be sent to the Health Select Committee. The Committee then seeks the views of interested groups, government organisations, and members of the public.

Advertisements in newspapers and online tell people that the bill is being considered. Those interested can make their views known by sending a written submission or by attending a public meeting. In the past, only some bills were referred to select committees, and this was only after the second reading. Beginning in 1972, bills were referred after their first reading. Since the 1980s, almost all bills have been sent to select committees.

How can people have a say?

Any person of any age can make a submission to a select committee. Before doing so, he or she should:

• Know what the bill is proposing and have an opinion about it.
• Find out more by talking with others, exploring online resources, and reading media reports and comments.
• When making a submission, a person or group should explain what they like about the bill (why they think it’s a good idea) or what they dislike about it (why they think it’s a bad idea). If they wish, they can also suggest improvements to the bill.

Written submissions may be sent to the clerk of the select committee or posted online.

For more information, see www.parliament.nz

HEARING SUBMISSIONS AND MAKING RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Submissions are received.

2. The select committee holds meetings, usually at Parliament. Sometimes the committee travels around the country to hear and discuss what people have to say.

   • Anyone can attend public select committee meetings, including the media.
   • People can make submissions in writing or be invited to speak at committee meetings known as hearings. The committee can ask a person to attend a hearing to answer questions about his or her submission. They can also ask people to attend when they have particular knowledge that may help the committee.
   • The committee may also ask government departments for information and advice about the bill.

3. After all the evidence has been heard, the committee meets in private. Members discuss the bill and agree on whether they want to recommend any changes to the House.

4. The committee reports to the House and explains its recommendations.
Discussion and activities

1. Complete the statements
Read the first statement and then complete the second. Number 1 has been completed for you.

1. About 13 select committees deal with major areas of the Government’s work. Other committees consider other areas of Parliament’s work.
2. Select committees spend most of their time examining bills and dealing with submissions. Their other work includes ...
3. People can make submissions in writing. They can also make submissions ...
4. Select committees can hear private submissions. They can also hear submissions ...
5. Select committees seek the views of the public. They also seek advice from ...
6. Sometimes a committee recommends changes to a bill. Sometimes the bill is ...
7. Submissions provide information. They also ...
8. A select committee can invite a person to attend a meeting. It can also ...
9. Select committees are usually open to the public when they hear evidence. They are private when members ...
10. Before making a submission, a person should know what the bill is about. He or she should also ...

2. Create a glossary for these words
select committee, submission, hearing, witnesses, evidence, scrutiny, confidential evidence, secret evidence

3. Try this
Imagine that a select committee is considering a bill that would make the buying, selling, and smoking of tobacco illegal. In a group, brainstorm arguments for and against the bill and undertake some research on the subject. Share your views on what you have learnt and discuss the points you would like to make to the select committee.

As a group, prepare a “submission” on this bill. Convey your key messages clearly and concisely. Proofread your submission carefully. If your group can’t agree on a position, form two groups and prepare two different submissions.