

Regional Parliamentary Committees

Following the Modernisation Committee's recent enquiry on Regional Accountability, MPs on Wednesday (Nov 12) debated the creation of Regional Parliamentary Committees.

The debate included considerable disagreement about the Motions being presented to the House, which were only taken forward on the casting vote of its Chair Harriet Harman after the Modernisation Committee itself had been split over establishing Regional Select and Grand Committees.

MPs debated the role and remit of Regional Select and Regional Grand Committees, their membership, and whether they would duplicate the existing accountability arrangements of regional scrutiny and the 41 other Parliamentary Select Committees. MPs did however, broadly agree that the accountability arrangements for publicly funded regional bodies needed to be strengthened, with MPs being able to hold these bodies to account. Below is a summary of what was agreed:

Regional Select Committees

- Regional Select Committees will be established in 8 of the English regions from 1 January 2009 to the end of the current Parliament (May 2010). The Regional Select Committees will be evaluated at the end of the current Parliament to identify whether they should continue
- The committee will consist of no more than 9 MPs, with at least one member from each of the three largest political parties. However, the membership must represent the membership of the House of Commons, meaning that MPs for other regions may sit on a Regional Select Committee. The Chairman of the Regional Select Committee will be unpaid;
- The Committee will meet significantly less frequently than Departmental Select Committees (the exact number of meetings has not yet been determined but it is thought that they will meet less than 6 times per year). Committee meetings can take place anywhere in the UK (MPs appear to want these to take place in the region that the Committee represents);
- The Committee will focus their enquiries and reports on regional policy and administration and will include examining regional strategies and the work of regional bodies in the regions. The Committee will therefore have the power to hold any regional body that is responsible for regional budgets, regional decision-making, determining regional priorities or regional delivery (a list of these bodies has not been prescribed but could include the Regional Development Agency, the Learning and Skills Council, the Highways Agency and the Strategic Health Authority). The Committee will also have the power to call people to attend meetings to give evidence, and be able to request papers and other records to aid their enquiry;
- The is able to appoint specialist advisors to assist in their enquiries, either to supply information or to provide explanation of technical terms and phrases. The Committee can also choose to invite other MPs from the region to attend and participate in certain committee meetings. However, these MPs will not be able to vote or move motions and amendments.

Regional Grand Committees

- Regional Grand Committees will be established in 8 of the English regions from 1 January 2009 to the end of the current Parliament. Again, these Committees will also be evaluated at the end of the current Parliament to identify whether they should continue;
- This Grand Committee will consist of every MP in the region and up to five MPs from other regions and will meet once or twice per year. It is expected that the meetings will take place in the region they represent;
- The Grand Committee will be a forum for discussing the 'state of the region', holding debates on regional issues and will be a platform for hearing statements from Ministers and for putting questions to the Regional Minister to hold them to account for their work. The business items may consist of oral and written questions, statements by a Minister followed by questions, and general debates on specified matters.