

This document is an extract of
Life in the United Kingdom
A journey to Citizenship

Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6

For British Citizenship Test Study

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CHAPTER 2

MIGRATION TO BRITAIN

If we go back far enough in time, almost everyone living in Britain today may be seen to have their origins elsewhere. We are a nation of immigrants - able to trace our roots to countries throughout Europe, Russia, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. In the past immigrant groups came to invade and to seize land. More recently, people have come to Britain to find safety and in search of jobs and a better life.

Britain is proud of its tradition of providing a safe haven for people fleeing persecution and conflict. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Protestant Huguenots from France came to Britain to escape religious persecution. The terrible famine in Ireland in the mid 1840s led to a surge of migration to the British mainland, where Irish labourers provided much of the workforce for the construction of canals and railways.

Between 1880 -1910, large numbers of Jewish people came to Britain from what are now Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus to escape the violence they faced at home. Unhappily, in the 1930s, fewer were able to leave Germany and central Europe in time to escape the Nazi Holocaust, which claimed the lives of 6 million people.

Migration since 1945

At the end of the Second World War, there was the huge task of rebuilding Britain after six years of war. With not enough people available for work, the British government encouraged workers from other parts of Europe to help with the process of reconstruction. In 1948, the invitation was extended to people in Ireland and the West Indies.

A shortage of labour in Britain continued throughout the 1950s and some UK industries launched advertising campaigns to attract workers from overseas. Centres were set up in the West Indies to

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recruit bus crews, and textile and engineering firms in the north of England and the Midlands sent agents to find workers in India and Pakistan. For about 25 years people from the West Indies, India, Pakistan, and later Bangladesh, travelled to work and settle in Britain.

In the 1970s, migration from these areas fell after the Government passed new laws restricting immigration to Britain. However, during this period, Britain admitted 28,000 people of Indian origin who had been forced to leave Uganda, and 22,000 refugees from South East Asia. In the 1980s, the largest immigrant groups were from the United States, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia.

With the fall of the Iron Curtain and the break-up of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 90s, other groups began to come to Britain, seeking a new and safer way of life. Since 1994 there has been a rise in the numbers moving to Britain from Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Africa and the Indian sub-continent, many of whom have sought political asylum. Migrants to Britain, however, face increasingly tighter controls, as the Government attempts to prevent unauthorised immigration and to examine more closely the claims of those seeking asylum.

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THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN

In nineteenth century Britain, families were usually large and, in most households, men, women, and children all contributed towards the family wage. Although they were economically very important, women in Britain had fewer rights in law than men. Until 1857, a married woman had no right to divorce her husband, and until 1882 a woman's earnings, along with any property or money she brought to the marriage, automatically belonged to her husband.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an increasing number of women campaigned and demonstrated for greater rights and, in particular, the right to vote. However, the protests and demonstrations were halted during the First World War, as women joined in the war effort and took on a much greater variety of work than they had done before. Women (over the age of 30) were finally given the right to vote and to stand for election for Parliament after the War had ended in 1918. It wasn't until 1928 that women in Britain received voting rights at the same age as men.

Despite these improvements, women still faced discrimination in the workplace. When a woman married, it was quite common for her to be asked to leave work by her employer. Many jobs were closed to women, and women found it very difficult to enter university. The 1960s and 70s saw increasing pressure from women for equal rights and, during this period, laws were passed giving women the right to equal pay and prohibiting employers from discriminating against women because of their sex.

Women in Britain today

Women in Britain make up 51 per cent of the population, and 45 per cent of the workforce. Girls, as a whole, leave school today with better qualifications than boys, and there are now more women than men at university. Employment opportunities for women now are much greater than they were in the past.

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Although women continue to be employed in traditionally female areas, such as health care, teaching, secretarial, and sales, there is strong evidence that attitudes are changing and that women are doing a much wider range of work than before.

Research shows that today very few people believe that women in Britain should stay at home and not go out to work. Today, almost three-quarters of women with children of school age are in paid work.

In many households, women continue to have a major share in childcare and housework, but here too there is evidence of greater equality, with fathers taking an increasing role in raising the family and household chores. Despite this progress, many argue that more needs to be done to achieve greater equality between women and men - particularly in the workplace.

Women in Britain do not have the same access as men to promotion and better- paid jobs, and the average hourly rate of pay for women is about 20 per cent lower than it is for men.

CHILDREN, FAMILY AND YOUNG PEOPLE

In Britain there are almost 15 million children and young people up to the age of 19. This represents almost a quarter of the UK population. Young people are considered to be a group with their own identity, interests, and fashions that in some ways distinguish them from older people. Generally speaking, once they reach adulthood, children tend to move away from the family home, but this varies from one family and one community to another. Most children in Britain receive weekly pocket money from their parents, and many get more for doing jobs around the house.

Children today in the UK do not play outside the home as much as they did in the past. Home entertainment, such as television, videos, and computers, are seen as part of the reason for this, but so also is an increased concern for children's safety. Incidents of

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child molestation by strangers are often reported in great detail, but there is no evidence that dangers of this kind are increasing.

As a result of changing attitudes towards divorce and separation, family patterns in Britain have also changed considerably in the last 20 years. Today while 65 per cent of children live with both birth parents, almost 25 per cent live in lone parent families, and 10 per cent live within a step family.

Education

The Government places great importance on the need to assess and test pupils in order to know what they have achieved. Compulsory testing takes place at the ages of seven, eleven and fourteen in England and Scotland (but not in Wales where more informal methods of assessment are favoured). These tests help to give parents a good indication of their children's progress and children know the subjects they are doing well and those that need extra attention.

Most young people take GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) examinations at sixteen, and many take vocational qualifications, A/S and A levels (Advanced levels), at seventeen and eighteen.

One in three young people now move onto higher education after school. The Government aim is to reach one in two. Of those that do, some defer their university entrance by taking a year out. This often includes periods doing voluntary work, traveling overseas, or earning money to pay for fees and living expenses at university.

Work

It is now common for young people to have a part-time job whilst they are still at school. Recent estimates suggest that there are two million children at work at any one time. The most common jobs are newspaper delivery and work in supermarkets and newsagents. Many parents believe that part-time work of this kind

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helps children to become more independent, as well as providing them (and sometimes their family) with extra income.

It is important to note, however, that the employment of children is strictly controlled by law, and that there are concerns for the safety of children who work illegally or are not properly supervised.

Health Hazards

Many parents in Britain worry that their children may misuse addictive substances and drugs in some way.

Cigarette consumption in Britain has fallen significantly and now only a minority of the population smoke. Restrictions are planned against smoking in public places. Smoking has declined amongst young people as well as adults, although statistics show that girls smoke more than boys. Tobacco, bylaw, should not be sold to anyone under the age of 16.

Alcohol abuse is a problem. Although young people below the age of 18 are not allowed by law to buy alcohol, there is concern in Britain over the age at which some young people start drinking, and the amount of alcohol that they consume in one session or "binge", Increasing penalties including on-the-spot fines are being introduced to help control this.

Controlled drugs are illegal drugs. It is an offence in Britain to possess, produce, or supply substances such as heroin, cocaine, ecstasy, amphetamines, and cannabis. However, current statistics indicate that half of young adults, and about a third of the population as a whole, have used illegal drugs at one time or another - if sometimes only as an experiment.

There is a well-established link between the use of hard drugs (eg crack cocaine and heroin) and crime, and it is widely accepted that drug misuse carries a huge social and financial cost to the country. Much crime, such as burglary or stealing in the Street by threat or violence (called mugging) is associated with wanting money for

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drugs. The task of finding an effective way of dealing with this problem is an important issue facing British society.

Young people's attitudes and action

Young people in Britain are able to vote in elections from the age of 18. However, in the 2001 general election, only one in five potential first-time voters actually cast their vote, and there has been a great debate over the reasons for this. Researchers have concluded that one reason is young people's distrust of politicians and the political process.

Although many young people show little interest in party politics, there is strong evidence that they are interested in some specific political issues. Those who commonly say they are not interested in politics at all often express strong concern about environmental issues and cruelty to animals.

A survey of the attitudes of young people in England and Wales in 2003 revealed that crime, drugs, war/terrorism, racism, and health were the five most important issues that they felt Britain faced today. The same survey asked young people about their participation in political and community events. It was reported that 86 per cent of young people had taken part in some form of community activity over the past year. 50 per cent had taken part in fund-raising or collecting money for charity.

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CHAPTER 3

POPULATION

In 2001, the population of the United Kingdom was recorded just under 59 million people.

UK population 2001

England 49.1 million 83% UK population

Scotland 5.1 million 9% UK population

Wales 2.9 million 5% UK population

N Ireland 1.7 million 3% UK population

Total UK 58.8 million

Source: National Statistics

More information on the 2001 Census is available from the Government Statistics website, <http://www.statistics.gov.uk>

Since 1951, the population has grown by 17 per cent. This is lower than the average growth for countries in the European Union (which is 23 per cent), and much smaller than some other countries, such as the USA (80 per cent), and Australia (133 per cent).

The UK birth rate was at an all time low in 2002 and, although it rose slightly in 2003, Britain now has an ageing population. For the first time, people aged 60 and over form a larger part of the population than children under 16. There is also a record number of people aged 85 and over.

Although there has been a general increase in population in the UK over the last 20 years, the growth has not been uniform, and some areas, such as the North East and North West of England have experienced a decline.

The Census

A census of the population in Britain has been taken every ten

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years since 1801 (with the exception of 1941, when Britain was at war). The next census will be in 2011.

When a census takes place, a census form is delivered to households throughout the country, and by law must be completed. The form asks for a lot of information to ensure that official statistics about the population are accurate, but is all completely confidential and anonymous as regards each individual. Only after 100 years can the records be consulted freely.

Ethnic diversity

The largest ethnic minority in Britain are people of Indian descent. These are followed by those of Pakistani descent, of mixed ethnic descent, Black Caribbean descent, Black African descent, and Bangladeshi descent. Together these groups make up 7.9 per cent of the UK population.

Today, about half the members of the African Caribbean, Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi communities were born in Britain. Considerable numbers of people of Chinese, Italian, Greek and Turkish Cypriot, Polish, Australian, Canadian, New Zealand and American descent are also resident within the UK.

White 54.2 million 92.0% UK population

Mixed 0.7 million 1.2% UK population

Asian or Asian British

Indian 1.1 million 1.8% UK population

Pakistani 0.7 million 1.3% UK population

Bangladeshi 0.3 million 0.5% UK population

Other Asian 0.2 million 0.4% UK population

Black or Black British

Black Caribbean 0.6 million 1.0% UK population

Black African 0.5 million 0.8% UK population

Black Other 0.1 million 0.2% UK population

Chinese 0.2 million 0.4% UK population

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Other 0.2 million 0.4% UK population

Source: National Statistics from the 2001 census

Where do people live?

Most members of ethnic minority groups live in England, where they make up nine per cent of the total population. This compares with two per cent each in Wales and Scotland, and less than one per cent in Northern Ireland.

45 per cent of the population of ethnic minorities live in the London area, where they comprise 29 per cent of all residents.

Most other members of ethnic minorities in Britain live in one of four other areas: the West Midlands, the South East, the North West, and Yorkshire and Humberside.

RELIGION AND TOLERANCE

Everyone in Britain has the right to religious freedom. Although Britain is historically a Christian society, people are usually very tolerant towards the faiths of others and those who have no religious beliefs.

In the 2001 Census, just over 75 per cent of the UK population reported that they had a religion. More than seven people out of ten stated that this was Christian. Nearly three per cent of the population described their religion as Muslim, and one per cent as Hindu. After these, the next largest religious groups are Sikhs, Jews, and Buddhists.

Although many people in Britain have a religious belief, this is not always matched by regular attendance at services. It is estimated that regular church attendance in England is between eight and eleven per cent of the population. Church attendance in Scotland however, although declining, is almost twice the level for England and Wales.

The established church

The Church of England, or Anglican Church as it is also known,

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came into existence in 1534. The King installed himself as head of the Church, and the title of Supreme Governor has been held by the King or Queen ever since.

The monarch at the coronation is required to swear to maintain the Protestant Religion in the United Kingdom, and heirs to the throne are not allowed to marry anyone who is not Protestant. The Queen or King also has the right to appoint a number of senior church officers, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is the head of the Church. In practice however, the Prime Minister makes this selection on the recommendation of a special committee appointed by the Church.

Other Christian groups

Further splits in the Church took place after the Reformation, giving rise to a number of different Protestant denominations. These included the Baptists, Presbyterians, and the Society of Friends (or Quakers), all of which continue today. In the eighteenth century the Methodist movement developed, working in particular amongst poorer members of society.

In Wales today, Baptists and Methodists are the two most widespread denominations. In Scotland there are more than a million members of the Presbyterian Church, the established Church of Scotland, known as the Kirk.

About ten per cent of the population of Britain are Roman Catholic.

THE REGIONS OF BRITAIN

Britain is a relatively small country. The distance from the north coast of Scotland to the south coast of England is approximately 600 miles (almost 1,000 km), and it is about 320 miles (just over 500 km) across the widest part of England and Wales. However, nowhere in Britain is more than 75 miles (120 km) from the coast. Many people remark on the great variety in the British landscape. In the space of a few hours it is possible to travel from a major

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cosmopolitan city to historic sites, old cathedrals, villages, moors and mountains.

Regional differences

In one respect, almost every part of Britain is the same. A common language, national newspapers, radio, and television, and shops with branches throughout the United Kingdom mean that everybody, to some degree, shares a similar culture. However beneath the increasingly standardised appearance of our city centres and suburbs, there are real diversities and cultural differences between different parts of the United Kingdom.

Possibly the two most distinctive areas of Britain are Wales and Scotland. Both have their own language. Welsh is taught in schools and widely spoken in north and west Wales. Gaelic is still spoken in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Many people believe that the Welsh and the Scots have a stronger sense of identity and culture than the English - perhaps brought about by their struggle to stay independent. The creation of the Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament in 1999 has led some people to suggest that England needs its own parliament and there is now considerable discussion about what is a distinctive English identity.

Accents are a clear indication of regional differences in Britain. Geordie, Scouse, and Cockney are well-known dialects from Tyneside, Liverpool, and London respectively, but other differences in speech exist in all parts of the country. Scottish and Welsh speech is distinctive, and varies within those two countries. In some areas a person's accent will indicate where they are from, within a distance of twenty miles.

Regional differences also exist in tile styles of buildings and the materials used in their construction. Thatched cottages, much less common than they once were, are mainly products of the south, the south-west and east of England. Older buildings are usually made from local stone, giving houses in North Yorkshire, Derbyshire, and many other places a unique appearance.

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The industrial legacy of regions also gives rise to distinct styles of architecture. The mill towns of northern England are good examples of this. The insularity of some communities, particularly on the coast and in remote corners of Britain, has meant that their appearance has changed very little in the past 50 years. In contrast, other areas, whose traditional industries have been replaced by others, are almost unrecognisable from what they were a generation ago.

CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS

Tourist guides commonly paint a view of a rural Britain that is not always recognisable to those who live here. The countryside is regarded by many as “real England”, but in fact, the great majority of people live in cities or their suburbs. People’s lives in the UK, like many others throughout the world, are a mixture of the old and the new. City dwellers love to visit the countryside. But the abolition of fox hunting, regarded by many city dwellers as long overdue, has been bitterly contested by most country dwellers who see it as a denial of their values and traditions.

Festivals and other traditions continue to exist in all parts of the country, but their existence depends almost entirely on the continued support of those who live in the local community.

Sport

Sport of all kind plays a major part in many people’s lives. Football, rugby, and cricket all have a large following, and success on the sporting field is a great source of local and national pride. Major sporting events, such as the Grand National horse race, the Football Association (FA) Cup Final, and the Wimbledon tennis championships, capture the attention of many people in Britain, including those who do not normally follow these sports.

National days

National days are not celebrated in Britain in the same way as they

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are in a number of other countries. Only in Northern Ireland (and the Republic of Ireland) is St Patrick's Day taken as an official holiday. The greatest celebrations are normally reserved for the New Year and the Christian festivals of Christmas and Easter.

National Days

1st March St David's Day, the national day of Wales
17th March St Patrick's Day, the national day of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland
23rd April St George's Day, the national day of England
30th November St Andrew's Day, the national day of Scotland

There are also four public holidays a year, called Bank Holidays, when legislation requires banks and most businesses to close. These are of no nationalistic or religious significance.

Religious and traditional festivals

Most religious festivals in Britain are based on the Christian tradition, but also widely recognised are customs and traditions such as Eid ul-Fitr, Divali and Yom Kippur, belonging to other religions. Many of these are explained to children in all the schools as part of their lessons in religious education, and they are celebrated by followers of these faiths in their communities.

The main Christian and traditional festivals

Christmas Day, December 25th celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ. It is normally seen as a time to be spent at home with one's family. Preparations often begin three or four weeks beforehand, as people decide what presents to buy for close family and friends.

A Christmas tree is usually decorated and installed in the entrance hall or living room, around which presents are placed before they are opened on Christmas Day. Christmas cards are normally sent to family and friends from the beginning of December. Non-Christians usually send cards too, which will often simply say 'seasons Greetings'. Houses are decorated with special Christmas

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garlands, and sometimes a wreath of holly on the front door. Mistletoe is often hung above doorways, beneath which couples should traditionally kiss. Christmas is both a religious and a secular holiday, celebrated by believers and non-believers alike. Many families attend a church service, either at midnight on Christmas Eve, or on Christmas morning.

Children hang up a long sock, stocking, or pillowcase at the foot of their bed, or around the fireplace for Father Christmas to fill with presents. On Christmas Day families traditionally sit down to a dinner of roast turkey, followed by Christmas pudding - a rich steamed pudding made from suet, dried fruit and spices.

The British Father Christmas is a cheerful old man with a beard, dressed in a red suit trimmed with fur. He travels from an area close to the North Pole on a sledge pulled by reindeer, delivering presents to children. The Father Christmas we have today is often said to be based on folklore that Dutch, German, and Swedish settlers brought to America, although there are a number of other rival theories explaining his origins.

Boxing Day, the 26th December, refers to a time when servants, gardeners, and other trades people used to receive money (a Christmas box) in appreciation for the work they had done throughout the year. Many people still give to postmen. Boxing Day is a holiday in Britain, where people visit family and friends and continue with Christmas festivities. It is also a popular day for sporting activities - weather permitting.

New Year, January 1st, is celebrated in Britain, as it is in many countries throughout the world. Parties or celebrations begin on New Year's Eve, and when midnight arrives everybody cheers and drinks a toast for good luck in the coming year.

In Scotland, New Year can be a bigger festival than Christmas. Here there is a tradition in many homes of first footing, in which the first visitor of the New Year brings in particular items such as

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coal, bread and whisky intended to ensure prosperity for the coming year.

In Wales, on the stroke of midnight, the back door is opened to release the Old Year. It is then locked to keep the luck in, and at the last stroke, the front door opened to let in the New Year.

Easter, which takes place in March or April, commemorates the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, although it is named after the Saxon goddess of spring, Eostre, whose feast took place at the spring equinox. Easter, like Christmas, has become increasingly secular, and often taken as an opportunity for a holiday.

Easter eggs, made from chocolate (traditionally, decorated chicken's eggs) are given as presents, particularly to children, symbolising new life and the coming of spring. Some places hold festivals and fairs on Easter Monday.-

Other traditions

St Valentine's Day, February 14th, is the day when boyfriends, girlfriends, husbands, and wives traditionally exchange cards and presents; cards are unsigned as if from secret admirers.

Mothering Sunday, three weeks before Easter, is a day on which children, young and old, remember their mothers by giving them flowers or chocolates and trying to make their day as easy and enjoyable as possible.

April Fool's Day, April 1st, is the day when people may play jokes on one another - but only until 12 noon. Sometimes even radio, television, and newspapers try to fool people with fake stories and jokes. The tradition is believed to have originated in sixteenth century France.

Guy Fawkes Night, November 5th, commemorates the Gunpowder Plot in 1605 when a small group of Catholics are said to have plotted to kill the King by blowing up the Houses of

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Parliament. Soldiers arrested Guido (Guy) Fawkes who was allegedly guarding the explosives beneath Parliament. Today he is remembered with fireworks and the burning of a "Guy" on a bonfire.

Remembrance Day, November 11th, keeps alive the memory of those who died in both World Wars and in later conflicts. Many people now hold a two minute silence at 11 am in remembrance of this, for it was at the eleventh hour, of the eleventh day, of the eleventh month in 1918 that the First World War (often called the Great War) finally came to an end.

The terrible fighting in the fields of Northern France and Flanders devastated the countryside and, in the disturbed earth of the bomb craters, it was the poppy that was one of the first plants to regrow. So this blood-red flower has come to symbolise the sacrifice of those who fall in war.

Today, in the period before Remembrance Day, artificial poppies are sold in shops and on the streets and many people wear them in their buttonholes in memory of the dead.

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CHAPTER 4

THE WORKING SYSTEM

Parliamentary democracy

The British system of government is a parliamentary democracy. General elections are held at least every five years, and voters in each constituency elect their MP (Member of Parliament) to sit in the House of Commons. Most MPs belong to a political party, and the party with the largest number of MPs in the House of Commons forms the government, with the more senior MPs becoming ministers in charge of departments of state or heads of committees of MPs.

The Prime Minister

The Prime Minister (PM) is the leader of the party in power. He or she appoints (and dismisses) ministers of state, and has the ultimate choice and control over many important public appointments. The Prime Minister's leading ministers form the Cabinet. The Prime Minister used to be called (in the lawyers' Latin of the old days) "primus inter pares", first among equals; but nowadays the office has become so powerful that some people liken it to the French or American Presidency, an office directly elected by the people for a fixed term.

However, a Prime Minister who is defeated in an important vote in the House of Commons, or who loses the confidence of the Cabinet, can be removed by their party at any time. This rarely happens, but when it does, the event is dramatic and the effects can be great. For example, Winston Churchill replaced Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in 1940; and Margaret Thatcher was forced to resign in 1990, when she lost the confidence of her colleagues.

Modern Prime Ministers have their official residence at 10 Downing Street, and have a considerable staff of civil servants and

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personal advisers. The PM has special advisers for publicity and relations with the press and broadcasting media - all of which adds to the power of the Prime Minister over his or her colleagues. Government statements are usually reported as coming from "Number Ten". If something is directly attributed to the Prime Minister it is of special importance.

The Cabinet

The Cabinet is a small committee of about twenty senior politicians who normally meet weekly to decide the general policies for the Government. Amongst those included in the Cabinet are ministers responsible for the economy (the Chancellor of the Exchequer), law and order and immigration (the Home Secretary), foreign affairs (the Foreign Secretary), education, health, and defence. Cabinet decisions on major matters of policy and law are submitted to Parliament for approval.

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THE BRITISH CONSTITUTION

To say that a state has a constitution can mean two different things in different countries. Usually it means a set of written rules governing how laws can be made, and setting out the rights and duties of citizens that can be enforced by a constitutional or supreme court. But sometimes there is no written constitution so that the term simply describes how a state is governed, what are the main institutions of government and the usual conventions observed by the government and the politicians.

The United Kingdom constitution is an unwritten constitution. But although no laws passed by Parliament can be directly challenged by any British court, there are restraints on government. Laws define the maximum length of parliaments, the electoral system, qualifications for citizenship, and the rights of non-citizens. There are the rules and procedures of Parliament itself, and interpretations of laws made by the courts in light of the traditions of the common law.

Sovereignty

A fundamental principle of the British constitution is “the sovereignty of Parliament”. But nowadays decisions of the European Union have to be observed because of the treaties that Britain has entered into; and British courts must observe the judgements of the European Court and the new Human Rights Act. Textbooks are written on “The British Constitution” and constitutional law, but no one authority will agree fully with another. Some constitutional disputes are highly political - such as what should be the composition and powers of the House of Lords and what is the best system of national and local elections.

Some reformers want a written constitution, as does the third largest party at Westminster, the Liberal -Democrats. But others, including the leaders of the Labour and Conservative parties value historical continuity coupled with flexibility and have no wish for big issues to be settled by a constitutional court, as in the United States and many other democratic countries. But what holds the

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unwritten system together is that party leaders observe conventions of political conduct.

Conventions

Conventions and traditions are very important in British political life. For example, the second largest party in the House of Commons not merely opposes the Government but is called “Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition”. It has a guaranteed amount of time in Parliament to debate matters of its own choice, and its rights are defended by the Speaker, who chairs proceedings in the House of Commons.

The Leader of the Opposition has offices in Parliament and receives financial support from the Treasury both for his or her office and for the Shadow Cabinet. These are senior members of the main opposition party who ‘shadow’ Government ministers in different departments. The Leader of the Opposition also has a constitutional status (that is why we use capital letters). He or she stands beside the Prime Minister on formal state occasions, as when the Queen opens Parliament or when wreaths are laid at the Cenotaph in Whitehall on Remembrance Day.

Question Time, when Members of Parliament may ask questions of government ministers, is another parliamentary convention. Questions to the Prime Minister by the Leader of the Opposition are usually lively and combative occasions, often widely reported.

A competitive party system

Under the British system of parliamentary democracy, candidates nominated by political parties, and sometimes individual independent candidates, compete for the votes of the electorate in general elections and by-elections. (By-elections are held to fill a vacancy when an MP resigns or dies in office). The struggle between the parties to influence public opinion, however, is continuous, and takes place not only at election time.

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The role of the media

Proceedings in Parliament are now broadcast on digital television and recorded in official reports, known as Hansard. Although copies of this are available in large libraries and on the Internet, www.parliament.uk, most people receive their information about political issues and events from newspapers, TV, and radio.

In Britain there is a free press - that is, one that is free from direct government control. The owners and editors of most newspapers hold strong political opinions and run campaigns to influence government policy. All newspapers have their own angle in reporting and commenting on political events. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish fact from opinion.

Spokesmen and women of all political parties put their own slant on things too - known today as 'spin'.

In Britain, the law states that political reporting on radio and television must be balanced. In practice, this means giving equal time to rival viewpoints. Broadcasters are free to interview politicians in a tough and lively fashion, as long as their opponents are also interviewed and treated in more or less the same way.

During a general election, the main parties are given free time on radio and television to make short party political broadcasts. In citizenship lessons in schools young people are encouraged to read newspapers critically and to follow news and current affairs programmes on radio and television.

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THE FORMAL INSTITUTIONS

Government and politics in Britain takes place in the context of mainly traditional institutions, laws and conventions, which ensure the acceptance of electoral or Parliamentary defeat, and peaceful and reasonably tolerant behaviour between political rivals.

The institutional arrangements are a constitutional monarchy, the House of Commons, the House of Lords, the electoral system, the party system and pressure groups, the judiciary, the police, the civil service, local government, and the recent devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, together with a large number of semi-independent agencies set up by the government, nicknamed quangos, and now officially called Non-Departmental Public Bodies.

A constitutional monarchy

Britain has a constitutional monarchy. Others exist in Denmark, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and Sweden. Under a constitutional monarchy, the powers of the King or Queen are limited by either constitutional law or convention.

In Britain, the Queen or King must accept the decisions of the Cabinet and Parliament. The monarch can express her or his views on government matters privately to the Prime Minister, for example at their weekly "audience", but in all matters of government must follow the Prime Minister's advice. The Queen or King can only, in a famous phrase, "advise, warn, and encourage". There would be a constitutional crisis if the monarch ever spoke out publicly either for or against government policy.

The present Queen has reigned since her father's death in 1952. The heir to the throne is her oldest son, the Prince of Wales. He has let his opinions be publicly known on a range of environmental and other matters, but when he becomes King he will be required to act and speak only in a ceremonial manner. Today there are some who argue that modern Britain should become a republic, with an elected President.

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However, despite public criticisms of some members of the royal family, the monarchy still remains important and popular among most people in Britain today as a symbol of national unity. People distinguish between the persons of the royal family and the institutions they represent.

The Queen is Head of State of the United Kingdom. She is also monarch or head of state, in both a ceremonial and symbolic sense, of most of the countries in the Commonwealth. The Queen has important ceremonial roles in this country, which include the opening and closing of Parliament. Each year at the beginning of a new parliamentary session she reads by tradition "the Queen's speech" from a throne in the House of Lords, stating the Government's policies for the next session. Today, however, these are entirely the views of the Prime Minister and the cabinet.

The monarch also gives the letters of appointment to holders of high office within the Government, the armed forces, and the Church of England, but always on the Prime Minister's advice.

The House of Commons

The House of Commons is the centre of political debate in Britain and the ultimate source of power. It shares the huge Palace of Westminster with the House of Lords. In medieval times, the House of Lords was the more powerful, and so you will still hear some commentators call the Commons, the Lower House, and the Lords, the Upper House. Today the Commons can always overrule the Lords who can only delay the passage of new laws.

The MPs who sit in the House of Commons are elected from 645 constituencies throughout the UK. They have a number of different responsibilities. They represent everyone in their constituency, they help create and shape new laws, they scrutinise and comment on what the Government is doing, and they provide a forum for debate on important national issues. If you visit the

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House of Commons you may find few MP5 in the main debating chamber. That is because most work is done in committees - scrutinising legislation, investigating administration, or preparing a report on some important issue.

Visiting Parliament

There are public galleries from which the public may listen to debates in both Houses of Parliament and many committees. You can write to your local MP to ask for tickets. There is no charge, but MP5 only have a small allocation of tickets, so requests should be made well in advance. Otherwise, on the day, you can join a queue at the public entrance, but a waiting time of one or two hours is common for important debates. Getting into the House of Lords is usually easier. Ask the police officer at the same entrance where to go. Further details are on UK Parliament website, <http://www.parliament.uk>.

The Speaker

The Speaker of the House of Commons is an ordinary MP, respected on all sides, and elected by fellow MP5. He or she has the important role of keeping order during political debates in a fair and impartial way; of representing the House of Commons on ceremonial occasions; and of ensuring the smooth running of the business of the House.

The Whips

The Whips are small group of MP5, appointed by their party leaders, to ensure discipline and attendance of MP5 at voting time in the House of Commons. The Chief Whip commonly attends Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet meetings and will negotiate with the Speaker over the timetable and the order of business.

The House of Lords

The House of Lords is in the middle of big changes. Until relatively recently, the members were all peers of the realm; that is hereditary aristocrats, or people who had been rewarded for their public service - for example in war, the Empire or government.

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They had no special duty to attend the House of Lords, and many did not do so.

In 1957 a new law was passed, enabling the Prime Minister to appoint peers just for their own lifetime. These Life Peers, as they were known, were to be working peers, and were encouraged to attend debates in the House of Lords on a regular basis. Today those appointed as life peers have normally had a distinguished career in politics, business, law, or some other profession. Recently hereditary peers had their general right to attend the House of Lords removed, but were allowed to elect a small number of themselves to continue to attend.

Life peers continue to be appointed by the Prime Minister although, by convention, always include people nominated by the leaders of the other parties. Senior Bishops of the Church of England are automatically members of the House of Lords, as are most senior judges. Life peers also include members of other Christian denominations and of other faiths --Jewish, Moslem, Hindu, Sikh, or Buddhist, as well non-believers and humanists.

Today the main role of the House of Lords is to examine in detail and at greater leisure new laws proposed by the House of Commons, and to suggest amendments or changes. In this way the Lords may delay - but not prevent - the passage of new legislation.

The House of Lords also frequently debates issues which the Commons pass over or can find no time for. House of Lords' committees also, from time to time, report on a particular social problem or scrutinise some aspect of the workings of government. To prevent a government from staying in power without holding an election, the

House of Lords has the absolute right to reject any proposed law that would extend the life of a Parliament beyond the statutory five year period. However, if this were ever to happen, the House of Commons could first abolish the House of Lords, who could

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only delay such an act! This is very unlikely but illustrates how constitutional restraints in the United Kingdom depends more on conventions than on strict law.

The electoral system

Members of the House of Commons (MP5) are elected by a “first past the post” system. The candidate in a constituency who gains more votes than any other is elected, even if he or she does not have a majority of the total votes cast. In the House of Commons, the government is formed by the party gaining the majority of the seats, even if more votes were cast in total for the Opposition.

Under this system, the number of seats going to the winner is always proportionately greater than their total vote. For this reason, some people argue that the system should be changed to one or other form of proportional representation, as in Ireland and most parts of continental Europe. However, neither of the main UK parties favours this, saying that large majorities in the House of Commons guarantee strong and stable government, and that PR (proportional representation) would lead to coalitions and instability.

However, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly were both set up with different systems of PR to ensure that they were not completely dominated by a single party, as can happen under a “first past the post” system. Similarly, the use of PR for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly is intended to stop the Unionist (mainly Protestant) majority of voters from taking all the posts of government, and ensure “power sharing” with the Irish nationalist (overwhelmingly Catholic) parties. In elections for the European Parliament yet another form of PR was adopted to conform more closely to European Union practice.

The party system and pressure groups

The British political system is essentially a party system in the way

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that decisions are made and elections conducted. There is only a handful of independent MP5 or MP5 from smaller parties

The main political parties have membership branches in every constituency throughout Britain. Local party organisations select candidates, discuss policy, and canvas the voters in national, local, and European elections. Annual national party conferences are carefully managed and well publicised events, where general party policy is debated, and where local parties can have a significant effect on the Parliamentary leadership.

Public opinion polls have also become very important to the leadership of each party. Party leaders know that they have to persuade and carry large numbers of the electorate, who are not party members, and who in recent years have become less fixed and predictable in their voting habits.

Political party membership in Britain has been declining rapidly in the last few years, perhaps as a consequence of greater consensus between the parties on the main questions of economic management, both seeking the middle ground so that differences of policy and principle are more difficult to perceive; or perhaps because people now, working longer hours and harder, and enjoying for the most part a greater standard of living, can or will give less time to public service.

No one knows if this is a temporary or a long-term change. This, combined with falling turn-out in elections, especially among 18-25 year olds, has become a matter of general concern and is widely discussed in the press and in the broadcasting media.

Pressure groups

Pressure groups are organisations that try to influence government policy, either directly or indirectly. There are many such groups in Britain today, and they are an increasingly important part of political life. Generally speaking, ordinary citizens today are more likely to support pressure groups than join a political party.

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Sometimes people distinguish between “pressure groups” and “lobbies”. Lobbies or “interest groups” are seen not as voluntary bodies of ordinary citizens but as the voice of commercial, financial, industrial, trade, or professional organisations.

The judiciary

Since medieval times, judges have prided themselves on being independent of the Crown. Under the British system, judges can never challenge the legality of laws passed by Parliament, but they do interpret legislation and if a law contravenes our human rights, judges can declare it incompatible. The law must then be changed.

As a rule, judges in court normally apply the law in the same way as they have done in the past. This ensures that similar cases are dealt with in a consistent way. However there are times when the circumstances of a case have not arisen before, or when senior judges decide that existing judgements do not reflect modern society.

In these situations, by their decisions, judges can create or change the law. Judges in Britain are appointed by a Government minister, the Lord Chancellor, from nominations put forward by existing judges. The names proposed are those of senior lawyers who are believed to have the ability and judgement to do the job.

In the last few years, however, there have been demands - to which the government is responding - that this process should become more transparent, and clearer to members of the press and public. It is also felt that judges should be more representative of the public at large. Many argue that the judges are drawn from too narrow a section of society and that women and members of ethnic minorities are not sufficiently represented.

The police

The police are organised on a local basis, usually with one force for each county. The largest force is the Metropolitan Police, with its headquarters at New Scotland Yard, which serves London. The

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police have “operational independence” - the Government cannot instruct them to arrest or proceed against any individual. But their administration is controlled by police authorities of elected local councillors and magistrates, and by the role of the Home Secretary. An independent authority investigates serious complaints against the police.

The Civil Service

The Government is serviced by a large number of independent managers and administrators, who have the job of carrying out Government policy. They are known as civil servants.

The key features of the civil service are political neutrality and professionalism. Before the mid-nineteenth century civil servants were appointed by ministers and had to be supporters of the party in power. Civil service reform began in the early 19th century, when the East India Company governed India. To prevent corruption and favouritism, candidates were required to pass competitive examinations. In the 1860s this system was extended to the Home Civil Service and continues with many modifications today.

Members of the British civil service today are permanent servants of the state, working for whatever party is in power. This neutrality is very important, but is sometimes a difficult balance to strike. Civil servants must warn ministers if they think a policy is impractical or even against the public interest; but must ultimately find a way of putting into practice the policies of the elected Government.

Political party officials tend to do everything they can to put Government policy in a favourable light. Civil servants may find themselves in a dilemma if they think that a minister is being too optimistic about the outcome of a particular policy, or asking them to do things specifically to discredit the Opposition. In the past, commentators suspected that civil servants too easily imposed their departmental policies on new ministers; but now the

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suspicion is often that civil servants can on occasion be pushed into open support for party policies they think to be either impractical or incompatible with other policies.

A major restraint on civil servants from becoming too politically involved is the knowledge that, if a general election brings another party to power, they will have to work with a new Government - and an entirely different set of aims and policies. When a General Election is pending or taking place, top civil servants study closely the Opposition's policies so that they are ready to serve a new government loyally.

Local government

Towns, cities, and rural areas in Britain are administered by a system of local government or councils, usually referred to as local authorities. Many areas have both district and county councils, although large towns and cities tend to be administered by a single authority, called a borough, metropolitan district, or city council.

Local authorities are responsible for providing a range of community services in their area such as education, planning, environmental health, passenger transport, the fire service, social services, refuse collection, libraries, and housing. Today local authorities in England and Wales have considerably less control over the organisation of these services than they did in the past.

What local government is required to do is called "mandatory services", as decided by central government. Citizens can take them to court if they do not perform them: But there are also "permissive services", though less than in the past: what they may do if they want to and can afford to do. In England and Wales local authorities may only offer permissive services if empowered to do so by government legislation. However in Scotland, under devolution, local authorities can do anything they are not explicitly forbidden to do. This is a simpler system to understand and operate, but financial constraints make the two systems more similar than might be supposed.

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Most of the money for local authority services comes from the Government, provided through taxation. Only about 20 per cent is funded locally through the collection of council tax. There are strict systems of accountability, which determine how local authorities spend their money, and the Government is now beginning to explore how much some local services can be delivered by voluntary community groups. Some see this as diminishing the powers of local government but others see it as a way of involving more ordinary citizens in how their area is run.

Elections for local government councillors are held in May each year. Many - but not all - candidates stand as members of a political party. A few cities in Britain, including London, also have their own elected mayors, with increased powers to manage local affairs. Serving on the local council is still frequently the first step (but less so than in the past) to getting the local party to nominate someone as a candidate for election to the national Parliament or Assembly or to the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATION

In 1997, the Government began a programme of devolving power from central government, with the intention of giving people in Wales and Scotland greater control over matters that directly affect them. Since 1999 there has been an Assembly in Wales, and a Parliament in Scotland, and the Government is now proposing the idea of regional governments in England when there is a clear local demand.

However, policy and laws governing defence, foreign affairs, taxation, and social security remain under the control of the UK Government in London, although these issues may be debated in the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament.

The National Assembly for Wales

The National Assembly for Wales is situated in Cardiff. It has 60 Assembly Members (AMs) and elections are held every four years.

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Members can speak in either English or Welsh and all its publications are in both languages. The Assembly does not have the power to make separate laws for Wales but it may propose laws for the decision of the UK Parliament in Westminster. However, it does have the power to decide on many other important matters, such as education policy; the environment, health services, transport and local government, where the present laws allow Welsh ministers a great deal of discretion in making detailed regulations.

The Parliament of Scotland

The Parliament of Scotland in Edinburgh arose as the result of a long campaign by people in Scotland for more independence and democratic control. For a long time there had been a devolved administration run by the Scottish Office, but no national elected body. A referendum for a Scottish Parliament, in 1979, did not gain enough support, but when another was held in 1979, the electorate gave a clear “yes” both to establishing a Scottish Parliament and to it having limited powers to vary national income tax.

Today there are 129 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) in Edinburgh, who are elected by a form of proportional representation. Unlike the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament may pass legislation on anything not specifically reserved to Westminster (foreign affairs, defence, general economic policy, and social security).

The Scottish Parliament is funded by a grant from the UK Government and can spend it how it chooses. It has the legal power to make small changes in the lower base rate of income tax, which it has not exercised so far, and has adopted its own procedures for debate, the passage of legislation and access to the public - all deliberately different from the traditional ways of Westminster.

The Northern Ireland Assembly

The Northern Ireland Parliament, often called Stormont after the building where it met, was established in 1922, following the division of Ireland after civil war. Protestant political parties

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however, dominated the Parliament, and abolished the electoral system of proportional representation that was designed to protect the Catholic minority - a community who faced considerable discrimination in housing and jobs in the public services. The Government in London paid little attention to these problems until, 50 years later, protests, riots, and a civil disobedience campaign led them to abolish Stormont when reforms failed to materialise. Conflicts increased between Protestant and Catholic groups, the former determined to remain part of the United Kingdom; while the latter determined to achieve unity with the Irish Republic.

There followed many years of communal distrust, violence, and terrorism. But after a negotiated cease-fire by both the main paramilitary groups - the IRA (the Irish Republican Army), and the UDA (the Ulster Defence Association) - the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998 between the main parties and endorsed by the Irish and British governments, working closely together.

Shortly afterwards, the Northern Ireland Assembly was established, with a power-sharing agreement in which the main parties divided the ministerial offices between them. The Assembly has 108 elected members, with powers to decide on matters such as education, agriculture, environment, health, and social services in Northern Ireland.

In view of the political situation in Northern Ireland, the UK government kept the power to suspend the Assembly if the political leaders could no longer agree to work together or if the Assembly was not working in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland. This has happened on a number of occasions.

Non-departmental public bodies

Much of government that affect us all is conducted not directly, but through a multitude of agencies with various degrees of independence. These are organisations that Parliament can create or abolish, or change their powers and roles, but are not a direct

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part of the civil service. They are sometimes called quangos - quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations.

A few examples of non-departmental public bodies

Trading bodies set up by central government that raise revenue : Her Majesty's Stationery Office (official and semi-official publications), Forestry Commission, National Savings Bank, Crown Estates Commission...

Spending agencies funded by government : Regional Health Authorities, Higher Education Funding Councils, Sports Council, Arts Council, Legal Services Commission, Medical Research Council....

Quasi-judicial and prosecuting bodies : Monopolies and Mergers Commission, Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority, Police Complaints Authority, Crown Prosecution Service....

Statutory Advisory Bodies to Ministers : Gaming Board, Health and Safety Commission, Law Commission, Commission for Racial Equality, Equal Opportunities Commission, Advisory Board on Naturalisation and Integration

Development agencies (many of which are public-private partnerships): Scottish Enterprise, Highlands and Islands Development Board (Scotland), Welsh Development Agency, Rural Development Commission, several regional Urban Development Corporations....

BRITAIN IN EUROPE AND THE WORLD

In addition to Britain's historical and cultural ties with countries throughout Europe, two major developments have occurred since the end of the Second World War in 1945 closely linking Britain to the remainder of Europe.

The Council of Europe

The Council of Europe was created in 1949, and Britain was one of

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the founder members. It is an organisation with 50 member states, working to protect human rights and seek solutions to problems facing European society today. The Council of Europe has no power to make laws, but does draw up conventions and charters, which states agree to follow. Examples of these are the European Convention on Human Rights measures to trace the assets associated with organised crime, and a directive for education for democratic citizenship in schools.

The European Union

The European Union originated in the period immediately after the Second World War when Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and West Germany signed an agreement putting all their coal and steel production under the control of a single authority. An important reason for doing this was the belief that cooperation between these states would reduce the likelihood of another European war. Britain refused to join this group at the beginning and only became part of the European Union (or European Economic Community, as it was then known) in 1973 after twice being vetoed by France. In 2004, ten new member countries joined the EU bringing membership to a total of 25.

The main aim behind the European Union today is for member states to become a single market. To achieve this, measures have gradually been introduced to remove tariff barriers and to help people, goods, and services move freely and easily between member states. This has involved a great deal of regulation being imposed on businesses and consumers, and has not always been popular.

Citizens of a EU member state have the right to travel to any EU country as long as they have a valid passport or identity card. This right may be restricted only for reasons of public health, public order, or public security. They also have the right to work in other EU countries, and must be offered employment under the same conditions as citizens of that state.

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The Council of Ministers

The Council of Ministers is one of the most influential bodies in the EU. It is made up of government ministers meeting periodically from each member state with powers to propose new laws and take important decisions about how the EU is run.

The European Commission

Based in Brussels, the European Commission is rather like the civil service of the European Union, taking care of the day to day running of the organisation. One of the important jobs the European Commission is to draft proposals for new EU policies and law.

The European Parliament

The European Parliament meets in Strasbourg in north-eastern France. Each country elects members roughly proportional to its population. Elections for Members of the European Parliament (MEP5) are held every five years.

The Parliament scrutinises and debates the proposals, decisions, and expenditures of the Commission, but does not decide policy. MEP5 have the ultimate power to refuse to agree EU expenditure, but have never done so - although they have held it up. Yet the threat has proved effective on several occasions.

European Union law

European Union law is an important source of law in Britain. EU legislation consists mainly of Regulations and Directives. Regulations are specific rules, such as those limiting the hours that drivers of goods vehicles can work, which automatically have the force of law in all EU member states. Regulations override national legislation and must be followed by the courts in each member state.

Directives are general requirements that must be introduced within a set time, but the way in which they are implemented is left to each member state. An example of this is the procedures

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that must be followed by companies when making staff redundant.

All proposals for new EU laws are examined by a committee of the UK Parliament, which then recommends any changes or amendments to ministers, who will decide whether to try and change or renegotiate them.

The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth arose out of the former British Empire that once included much of Africa and the West Indies, Canada, the Indian sub-continent, Australia and New Zealand. Since 1945, almost all these countries have become independent and together form a loose association called the Commonwealth, with the Crown at its symbolic head.

Only the United Nations is a larger international organisation than the British Commonwealth. The Commonwealth has a membership of 54 states, which together contain 1.7 billion people - 30 per cent of the world's population. Its aims include the development of democracy, good government, and the eradication of poverty, but it has no power over its members other than that of persuasion and only rarely acts together on international issues.

A common language, similarities in culture, and (with some exceptions) mutual recognition of professional qualifications, has greatly assisted the movement of people within the Commonwealth, and had a major effect on migration both to and from Britain.

The United Nations

Britain, like most countries in the world, is a member of the United Nations (UN) - an international organisation, working to prevent war and to maintain international peace and security. Britain is a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The functions of this group include recommending action by the UN in the event of international crises and threats to peace.

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Two very important documents produced by the United Nations are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Britain has signed and ratified both of these agreements. Although neither have the force of law, they are important measures by which the behaviour of a state can be judged, and they are increasingly used both in political debate and in legal cases, to reinforce points of law.

THE ORDINARY CITIZEN

The right to vote

How does the ordinary citizen connect to government? As we have seen, full democracy came slowly to Britain. Only in 1928 did both men and women aged 21 and over gain the right to vote. The present voting age of 18 was set in 1969.

Both British born and naturalised citizens have full civic rights and duties (such as jury service), including the right to vote in all elections, as long as they are on the electoral register. Permanent residents who are not citizens have all civil and welfare rights except the right to hold a British passport and a general right to vote.

The electoral register

In order to vote in a parliamentary, local, or European election, you must have your name on the register of electors, known as the electoral register. If you are eligible to vote you may register at any time by contacting your local council election registration office. Voter registration forms are also available, in English, Welsh, and a number of other languages, via the Internet from the Electoral Commission, www.electoralcommission.org.uk

However the electoral register is also updated annually and an electoral registration form is sent to all households in September or October each year. The form should be completed according to the instructions, and should include everyone eligible to vote who is resident in the household on 15th October.

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By law, a local authority has to make the electoral register available for anyone to look at. The register is held at the local electoral registration office (or council office in England and Wales) and some public buildings, such as libraries (however this is not always possible as new regulations require that any viewing of the electoral register is supervised, and libraries do not always have the necessary resources).

You have the right to have your name placed on the electoral register if you are aged 18 or over and a citizen of the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth, or a European Union member state. Citizens of the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth, and the Irish Republic resident in this country may vote in all public elections. Citizens of EU states, resident in the UK, have the right to vote in all but national parliamentary elections.

Participation

The number of people turning out to vote in parliamentary elections in Britain has been falling for several years, especially amongst the young. In the General Election of 2001, less than half of voters below the age of 25 actually voted. The Government and the political parties are looking for ways in which this trend might be reversed.

Standing for office

Citizens of the United Kingdom, the Irish Republic, or the Commonwealth, aged 21 or over, may stand for public office. However, there are some exceptions, which include peers, members of the armed forces, civil servants, and those found guilty of certain criminal offences.

To become a local councillor, a candidate must have a local connection with the area, through work, by being on the electoral register, or through renting or owning land or property.

This rule, however, does not apply to MP5, MEP5, or to members of the Scottish Parliament, or the Welsh or Northern Ireland

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Assemblies. Candidates standing for these bodies must pay a deposit of £500, which is not returned if they receive less than five per cent of the vote. The deposit for candidates standing as a Member of the European Parliament is £5,000. This is to discourage frivolous or hopeless candidates, though many still try their luck.

Contacting elected members

All elected members have a duty to serve and represent the interests of their constituents. Contact details of all your representatives and their parties are available from the local library.

Those of Assembly Members, MP5, and MEPs are listed in the phone book and Yellow Pages. An MP may be reached either at their constituency office or their office in the House of Commons by letter or phone. The address: House of Commons, Westminster, London SW1A 0AA, tel 020 7219 3000.

Many Assembly Members, MPs, and MEPs hold regular local 'surgeries', often on Saturday mornings. These are generally advertised in the local paper, and allow constituents to call in person to raise matters of concern. You can also find out the name of local MP and get in touch with them by fax through the website, <http://www.writetothem.com> . This service is free.

Chapter 5 section 1

Housing

Buying a home

Two-thirds of people in the UK own their own home. Most other people rent houses, flats or rooms.

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Mortgages

People who buy their own home usually pay for it with a mortgage, a special loan from a bank or building society. This loan is paid back, with interest, over a long period of time, usually 25 years. You can get information about mortgages from a bank or building society. Some banks can also give information about Islamic (Sharia) mortgages.

If you are having problems paying your mortgage repayments, you can get help and advice. It is important to speak to your bank or building society as soon as you can.

Estate agents

If you wish to buy a home, usually the first place to start is an estate agent. In Scotland the process is different and you should go first to a solicitor. Estate agents represent the person selling their house or flat. They arrange for buyers to visit homes that are for sale. There are estate agents in all towns and cities and they usually have websites where they advertise the homes for sale. You can also find details about homes for sale on the internet and in national and local newspapers.

Making an offer

In the UK, except in Scotland, when you find a home you wish to buy you have to make an offer to the seller. You usually do this through an estate agent or solicitor. Many people offer a lower price than the seller is asking. Your first offer must be 'subject to contract' so that you can withdraw if there are reasons why you cannot complete the purchase. In Scotland the seller sets a price and buyers make offers over that amount. The agreement becomes legally binding earlier than it does elsewhere in the UK.

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Solicitor and surveyor

It is important that a solicitor helps you through the process of buying a house or flat. When you make an offer on a property, the solicitor will carry out a number of legal checks on the property, the seller and the local area. The solicitor will provide the legal agreements necessary for you to buy the property. The bank or building society that is providing you with your mortgage will also carry out checks on the house or flat you wish to buy. These are done by a surveyor. The buyer does not usually see the result of this survey, so the buyer often asks a second surveyor to check the house as well. In Scotland the survey is carried out before an offer is made, to help people decide how much they want to bid for the property.

Rented accommodation

It is possible to rent accommodation from the local authority (the council), from a housing association or from private property owners called landlords.

The local authority

Most local authorities (or councils) provide housing. This is often called 'council housing'. In Northern Ireland social housing is provided by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (www.nihe.co.uk). In Scotland you can find information on social housing at www.sfha.co.uk . Everyone is entitled to apply for council accommodation. To apply you must put your name on the council register or list. This is available from the housing department at the local authority. You are then assessed according to your needs. This is done through a system of points. You get more points if you have priority needs, for example if you are homeless and have children or chronic ill health.

It is important to note that in many areas of the UK there is a shortage of council accommodation, and that some people have to wait a very long time for a house or flat.

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Housing associations

Housing associations are independent not-for-profit organisations which provide housing for rent. In some areas they have taken over the administration of local authority housing. They also run schemes called shared ownership, which help people buy part of a house or flat if they cannot afford to buy all of it at once. There are usually waiting lists for homes owned by housing associations.

Privately rented accommodation

Many people rent houses or flats privately, from landlords. Information about private accommodation can be found in local newspapers, notice boards, estate agents and letting agents.

Tenancy agreement

When you rent a house or flat privately you sign a tenancy agreement, or lease. This explains the conditions or 'rules' you must follow while renting the property. This agreement must be checked very carefully to avoid problems later. The agreement also contains a list of any furniture or fittings in the property. This is called an inventory. Before you sign the agreement, check the details and keep it safe during your tenancy.

Deposit and rent

You will probably be asked to give the landlord a deposit at the beginning of your tenancy. This is to cover the cost of any damage. It is usually equal to one month's rent. The landlord must return this money to you at the end of your tenancy, unless you have caused damage to the property.

Your rent is fixed with your landlord at the beginning of the tenancy. The landlord cannot raise the rent without your agreement.

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If you have a low income or are unemployed you may be able to claim Housing Benefit to help you pay your rent.

Renewing and ending a tenancy

Your tenancy agreement will be for a fixed period of time, often six months. After this time the tenancy can be ended or, if both tenant and landlord agree, renewed. If you end the tenancy before the fixed time, you usually have to pay the rent for the agreed full period of the tenancy.

A landlord cannot force a tenant to leave. If a landlord wishes a tenant to leave they must follow the correct procedures. These vary according to the type of tenancy. It is a criminal offence for a landlord to use threats or violence against a tenant or to force them to leave without an order from court.

Discrimination

It is unlawful for a landlord to discriminate against someone looking for accommodation because of their sex, race, nationality, or ethnic group, or because they are disabled, unless the landlord or a close relative of the landlord is sharing the accommodation.

Homelessness

If you are homeless you should go for help to the local authority (or, in Northern Ireland, the Housing Executive). They have a legal duty to offer help and advice, but will not offer you a place to live unless you have priority need and have a connection with the area, such as work or family. You must also show that you have not made yourself intentionally homeless.

Help

If you are homeless or have problems with your landlord, help can be found from the following

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- The housing department of the local authority will give advice on homelessness and on Housing Benefit as well as deal with problems you may have in council-owned property
- The Citizens Advice Bureau will give advice on all types of housing problems There may also be a housing advice centre in your neighbourhood
- Shelter is a housing charity which runs a 24-hour helpline on 0808 800 4444, or visit www.shelternet.org.uk
- Help with the cost of moving and setting up home may be available from the Social Fund This is run by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). It provides grants and loans such as the Community Care Grant for people setting up home after being homeless or after they have been in prison or other institutions. Other loans are available for people who have had an emergency such as flooding. Information about these is available at the Citizens Advice Bureau or Jobcentre Plus.

Chapter 5 section 2

Services in and for the home

Water

Water is supplied to all homes in the UK. The charge for this is called the water rates. When you move in to a new home (bought or rented), you should receive a letter telling you the name of the company responsible for supplying your water. The water rates may be paid in one payment (a lump sum) or in instalments, usually monthly. If you receive Housing Benefit, you should check to see if this covers the water rates. The cost of the water usually depends on the size of your property, but some homes have a water meter which tells you exactly how much water you have used. In Northern Ireland

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water is currently (2006) included in the domestic rates, although this may change in future.

Electricity and gas

All properties in the UK have electricity supplied at 240 volts. Most homes also have gas. When you move into a new home or leave an old one, you should make a note of the electricity and gas meter readings. If you have an urgent problem with your gas, electricity or water supply, you can ring a 24-hour helpline. This can be found on your bill, in the Yellow Pages or in the phone book.

Gas and electricity suppliers

It is possible to choose between different gas and electricity suppliers. These have different prices and different terms and conditions. Get advice before you sign a contract with a new supplier. To find out which company supplies your gas, telephone Transco on 0870 608 1524.

To find out which company supplies your electricity, telephone Energywatch on 0845 906 0708 or visit: www.energywatch.org.uk . Energywatch can also give you advice on changing your supplier of electricity or gas.

Telephone

Most homes already have a telephone line (called a land line). If you need a new line, telephone BT on 150 442, or contact a cable company. Many companies offer land line, mobile telephone and broadband internet services. You can get advice about prices or about changing your company from Ofcom at www.ofcom.org.uk . You can call from public payphones using cash, pre-paid phonecards or credit or debit cards. Calls made from hotels and hostels are usually more expensive Dial 999 or 112 for emergency calls for police, fire or ambulance service. These calls are free. Do not use these numbers if it is

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not a real emergency; you can always find the local numbers for these services in the phone book.

Bills

Information on how to pay for water, gas, electricity and the telephone is found on the back of each bill. If you have a bank account you can pay your bills by standing order or direct debit. Most companies operate a budget scheme which allows you to pay a fixed sum every month. If you do not pay a bill, the service can be cut off. To get a service reconnected, you have to pay another charge.

Refuse collection

Refuse is also called waste, or rubbish. The local authority collects the waste regularly, usually on the same day of each week. Waste must be put outside in a particular place to get collected. In some parts of the country the waste is put into plastic bags, in others it is put into bins with wheels. In many places you must recycle your rubbish, separating paper, glass, metal or plastic from the other rubbish. Large objects which you want to throwaway, such as a bed, a wardrobe or a fridge, need to be collected separately. Contact the local authority to arrange this. If you have a business, such as a factory or a shop, you must make special arrangements with the local authority for your waste to be collected. It is a criminal offence to dump rubbish anywhere.

Council Tax

Local government services, such as education, police, roads, refuse collection and libraries, are paid for partly by grants from the government and partly by Council Tax. In Northern Ireland there is a system of domestic rates instead of the Council Tax. The amount of Council Tax you pay depends on the size and value of your house or flat (dwelling). You must register to pay Council Tax when you move into a new property, either as the owner or the tenant You

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can pay the tax in one payment, in two instalments, or in ten instalments (from April to January).

If only one person lives in the flat or house, you get a 25% reduction on your Council Tax. (This does not apply in Northern Ireland). You may also get a reduction if someone in the property has a disability. People on a low income or who receive benefits such as Income Support or Jobseeker's Allowance can get Council Tax Benefit. You can get advice on this from the local authority or the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Buildings and household insurance

If you buy a home with a mortgage, you must insure the building against fire, theft and accidental damage. The landlord should arrange insurance for rented buildings. It is also wise to insure your possessions against theft or damage. There are many companies that provide insurance.

Neighbours

If you live in rented accommodation, you will have a tenancy agreement. This explains all the conditions of your tenancy. It will probably include information on what to do if you have problems with your housing. Occasionally, there may be problems with your neighbours. If you do have problems with your neighbours, they can usually be solved by speaking to them first. If you cannot solve the problem, speak to your landlord, local authority or housing association. Keep a record of the problems in case you have to show exactly what the problems are and when they started. Neighbours who cause a very serious nuisance may be taken to court and can be evicted from their home.

There are several mediation organisations which help neighbours to solve their disputes without having to go to court. Mediators talk to both sides and try to find a solution acceptable to both. You can get details of mediation

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organisations from the local authority, Citizens Advice, and Mediation UK on 0117 904 6661 or visit: www.mediationuk.co.uk.

Chapter 5 section 3

Money and credit

Bank notes in the UK come in denominations (values) of £5, £10, £20 and £50. Northern Ireland and Scotland have their own bank notes which are valid everywhere in the UK, though sometimes people may not realise this and may not wish to accept them.

The euro

In January 2002 twelve European Union (EU) states adopted the euro as their common currency. The UK government decided not to adopt the euro at that time, and has said it will only do so if the British people vote for the euro in a referendum. The euro does circulate to some extent in Northern Ireland, particularly in the towns near the border with Ireland.

Foreign currency

You can get or change foreign currency at banks, building societies, large post offices and exchange shops or bureaux de change. You might have to order some currencies in advance. The exchange rates vary and you should check for the best deal.

Banks and building societies

Most adults in the UK have a bank or building society account. Many large national banks or building societies have branches in towns and cities throughout the UK. It is worth checking the different types of account each one offers. Many employers pay salaries directly into a bank or building society account. There are many banks and building societies to choose from.

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To open an account, you need to show documents to prove your identity, such as a passport, immigration document or driving licence. You also need to show something with your address on it like a tenancy agreement or household bill. It is also possible to open bank accounts in some supermarkets or on the internet.

Cash and debit cards

Cash cards allow you to use cash machines to withdraw money from your account. For this you need a Personal Identification Number (PIN) which you must keep secret. A debit card allows you to pay for things without using cash. You must have enough money in your account to cover what you buy. If you lose your cash card or debit card you must inform the bank immediately.

Credit and store cards

Credit cards can be used to buy things in shops, on the telephone and over the internet. A store card is like a credit card but used only in a specific shop. Credit and store cards do not draw money from your bank account, but you will be sent a bill every month. If you do not pay the total amount on the bill, you are charged interest. Although credit and store cards are useful, the interest is usually very high and many people fall into debt this way. If you lose your credit or store cards you must inform the company immediately.

Credit and loans

People in the UK often borrow money from banks and other organisations to pay for things like household goods, cars and holidays. This is more common in the UK than in many other countries. You must be very sure of the terms and conditions when you decide to take out a loan. You can get advice on loans from the Citizens Advice Bureau if you are uncertain.

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Being refused credit

Banks and other organisations use different information about you to make a decision about a loan, such as your occupation, address, salary and previous credit record. If you apply for a loan you might be refused. If this happens, you have the right to ask the reason why.

Credit unions

Credit unions are financial co-operatives owned and controlled by their members. The members pool their savings and then make loans from this pool. Interest rates in credit unions are usually lower than banks and building societies. There are credit unions in many cities and towns. To find the nearest credit union contact the Association of British Credit Unions (ABCUL) on www.abcuk.coop.

Insurance

As well as insuring their property and possessions, many people insure their credit cards and mobile phones. They also buy insurance when they travel abroad in case they lose their luggage or need medical treatment. Insurance is compulsory if you have a car or motorcycle. You can usually arrange insurance directly with an insurance company, or you can use a broker who will help you get the best deal.

Social security

The UK has a system of social security which pays welfare benefits to people who do not have enough money to live on. Benefits are usually available for the sick and disabled, older people, the unemployed and those on low incomes. People who do not have legal rights of residence (or 'settlement') in the UK cannot usually receive benefits. Arrangements for paying and receiving benefits are complex because they have to cover people in many

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different situations. Guides to benefits are available from Jobcentre Plus offices, local libraries, post offices and the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Chapter 5 section 4

Health

Healthcare in the UK is organised under the National Health Service (NHS). The NHS began in 1948, and is one of the largest organisations in Europe. It provides all residents with free healthcare and treatment.

Finding a doctor

Family doctors are called General Practitioners (GPs) and they work in surgeries. GPs often work together in a group practice. This is sometimes called a Primary Health Care Centre.

Your GP is responsible for organising the health treatment you receive. Treatment can be for physical and mental illnesses. If you need to see a specialist, you must go to your GP first. Your GP will then refer you to a specialist in a hospital. Your GP can also refer you for specialist treatment if you have special needs.

You can get a list of local GPs from libraries, post offices, the tourist information office, the Citizens Advice Bureau, the local Health Authority and from the following websites:

www.nhs.uk/ for health practitioners in England;

www.wales.nhs.uk/directory.cfm for health practitioners in Wales; www.ninhs.uk for health practitioners in Northern Ireland;

www.show.scot.nhs.uk/findnearest/healthservices in Scotland

You can also ask neighbours and friends for the name of their local doctor.

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You can attend a hospital without a GP's letter only in the case of an emergency. If you have an emergency you should go to the Accident and Emergency (A & E) department of the nearest hospital.

Registering with a GP

You should look for a GP as soon as you move to a new area. You should not wait until you are ill. The health centre, or surgery, will tell you what you need to do to register. Usually you must have a medical card. If you do not have one, the GP's receptionist should give you a form to send to the local health authority. They will then send you a medical card.

Before you register you should check the surgery can offer what you need. For example, you might need a woman GP or maternity services. Sometimes GPs have many patients and are unable to accept new ones. If you can not find a GP you can ask your local health authority to help you find one.

Using your doctor

All patients registering with a GP are entitled to a free health check. Appointments to see the GP can be made by phone or in person. Sometimes you might have to wait several days before you can see a doctor. If you need immediate medical attention ask for an urgent appointment. You should go to the GP's surgery a few minutes before the appointment. If you cannot attend or do not need the appointment any more, you must let the surgery know. The GP needs patients to answer all questions as fully as possible in order to find out what is wrong. Everything you tell the GP is completely confidential and cannot be passed on to anyone else without your permission. If you do not understand something, ask for clarification. If you have difficulties with English, bring someone who can help you, or ask the receptionist for an interpreter. This must be done when you make the appointment. If you have

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asked for an interpreter, it is important that you keep your appointment because this service is expensive.

In exceptional circumstances, GPs can visit patients at home but they always give priority to people who are unable to travel. If you call the GP outside normal working hours, you will have to answer several questions about your situation. This is to assess how serious your case is. You will then be told if a doctor can come to your home. You might be advised to go to the nearest A & E department.

Charges

Treatment from the GP is free but you have to pay a charge for your medicines and for certain services, such as vaccinations for travel abroad. If the GP decides you need to take medicine you will be given a prescription. You must take this to a pharmacy (chemist).

Prescriptions

Prescriptions are free for anyone who is

- under 16 years of age (under 25 in Wales)
- under 19 and in full-time education
- aged 60 or over
- pregnant or with a baby under 12 months old
- suffering from a specified medical condition
- receiving Income Support, Jobseekers' Allowance, Working Families or Disabilities Tax Credit

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Feeling unwell

If you or your child feels unwell you have the following options:

For information or advice

- ask your local pharmacist (chemist). The pharmacy can give advice on medicines and some illnesses and conditions that are not serious.
- speak to a nurse by phoning NHS Direct on 0845 46 47
- use the NHS Direct website, NHS Direct Online: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

To see a doctor or nurse

- make an appointment to see your GP or a nurse working in the surgery
- visit an NHS walk-in centre

For urgent medical treatment

- contact your GP
- go to your nearest hospital with an Accident and Emergency department
- call 999 for an ambulance. Calls are free. ONLY use this service for a real emergency.

NHS Direct is a 24-hour telephone service which provides information on particular health conditions. Telephone. 0845 46 47. You may ask for an interpreter for advice in your own language. In Scotland, NHS24 at www.nhs24.com telephone 08454 24 24 24.

NHS Direct Online is a website providing information about health services and several medical conditions and treatments: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

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NHS walk-in centres provide treatment for minor injuries and illnesses seven days a week. You do not need an appointment. For details of your nearest centre call NHS Direct or visit the NHS website at: www.nhs.uk (for Northern Ireland www.n-i.nhs.uk) and click on 'local NHS services'.

Going into hospital

If you need minor tests at a hospital, you will probably attend the Outpatients department. If your treatment takes several hours, you will go into hospital as a day patient. If you need to stay overnight, you will go into hospital as an in-patient.

You should take personal belongings with you, such as a towel, night clothes, things for washing, and a dressing gown. You will receive all your meals while you are an in-patient. If you need advice about going into hospital, contact Customer Services or the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) at the hospital where you will receive treatment.

Dentists

You can get the name of a dentist by asking at the local library, at the Citizens Advice Bureau and through NHS Direct. Most people have to pay for dental treatment. Some dentists work for the NHS and some are private. NHS dentists charge less than private dentists, but some dentists have two sets of charges, both NHS and private. A dentist should explain your treatment and the charges before the treatment begins.

Free dental treatment is available to

- people under 18 (in Wales people under 25 and over 60)
- pregnant women and women with babies under 12 months old

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- people on income support, Jobseekers' Allowance or Pension Credit Guarantee

Opticians

Most people have to pay for sight tests and glasses, except children, people over 60, people with certain eye conditions and people receiving certain benefits. In Scotland, eye tests are free.

Pregnancy and care of young children

If you are pregnant you will receive regular ante-natal care. This is available from your local hospital, local health centre or from special antenatal clinics. You will receive support from a GP and from a midwife. Midwives work in hospitals or health centres. Some GPs do not provide maternity services so you may wish to look for another GP during your pregnancy. In the UK women usually have their babies in hospital, especially if it is their first baby. It is common for the father to attend the birth, but only if the mother wants him to be there.

A short time after you have your child, you will begin regular contact with a health visitor. She or he is a qualified nurse and can advise you about caring for your baby. The first visits will be in your home, but after that you might meet the health visitor at a clinic. You can ask advice from your health visitor until your child is five years old. In most towns and cities there are mother and toddler groups or playgroups for small children. These often take place at local churches and community centres. You might be able to send your child to a nursery school.

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Information on pregnancy

You can get information on maternity and ante-natal services in your area from your local health authority, a health visitor or your GP. The number of your health authority will be in the phone book.

The Family Planning Association (FPA) gives advice on contraception and sexual health. The FPA's helpline is 0845310 1334, or: www.fpa.org.uk.

The National Childbirth Trust gives information and support in pregnancy, childbirth and early parenthood: www.nctpregnancyandbabycare.com.

Registering a birth

You must register your baby with the Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths (Register Office) within six weeks of the birth. The address of your local Register Office is in the phone book. If the parents are married, either the mother or father can register the birth. If they are not married, only the mother can register the birth. If the parents are not married but want both names on the child's birth certificate, both mother and father must be present when they register their baby.

Chapter 5 section 5

Education

Going to school

Education in the UK is free and compulsory for all children between the ages of 5 and 16 (4 to 16 in Northern Ireland). The education system varies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

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The child's parent or guardian is responsible for making sure their child goes to school, arrives on time and attends for the whole school year. If they do not do this, the parent or guardian may be prosecuted.

Some areas of the country offer free nursery education for children over the age of 3. In most parts of the UK, compulsory education is divided into two stages, primary and secondary. In some places there is a middle-school system. In England and Wales the primary stage lasts from 5 to 11, in Scotland from 5 to 12 and in Northern Ireland from 4 to 11. The secondary stage lasts until the age of 16. At that age young people can choose to leave school or to continue with their education until they are 17 or 18.

Details of local schools are available from your local education authority office or website. The addresses and phone numbers of local education authorities are in the phone book.

Primary schools

These are usually schools where both boys and girls learn together and are usually close to a child's home. Children tend to be with the same group and teacher all day. Schools encourage parents to help their children with learning, particularly with reading and writing.

Secondary schools

At age 11 (12 in Scotland) children go to secondary school. This might normally be the school nearest their home, but parents in England and Wales are allowed to express a preference for a different school. In some areas, getting a secondary school place in a preferred school can be difficult, and parents often apply to several schools in order to make sure their child gets offered a place. In Northern Ireland many schools select children through a test taken at the age of 11.

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If the preferred school has enough places, the child will be offered a place. If there are not enough places, children will be offered places according to the school's admission arrangements. Admission arrangements vary from area to area.

Secondary schools are larger than primary schools. Most are mixed sex, although there are single sex schools in some areas. Your local education authority will give you information on schools in your area. It will also tell you which schools have spaces and give you information about why some children will be given places when only a few are available and why other children might not. It will also tell you how to apply for a secondary school place.

Costs

Education at state schools in the UK is free, but parents have to pay for school uniforms and sports wear. There are sometimes extra charges for music lessons and for school outings. Parents on low incomes can get help with costs, and with the cost of school meals. You can get advice on this from the local education authority or the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Church and other faith schools

Some primary and secondary schools in the UK are linked to the Church of England or the Roman Catholic Church. These are called 'faith schools'.

In some areas there are Muslim, Jewish and Sikh schools. In Northern Ireland, some schools are called Integrated Schools. These schools aim to bring children of different religions together. Information on faith schools is available from your local education authority.

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Independent schools

Independent schools are private schools. They are not run or paid for by the state. Independent secondary schools are also sometimes called public schools. There are about 2,500 independent schools in the UK. About 8% of children go to these schools. At independent schools parents must pay the full cost of their child's education. Some independent schools offer scholarships which pay some or all of the costs of the child's education.

The school curriculum

All state, primary and secondary schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland follow the National Curriculum. This covers English, maths, science, design and technology, information and communication technology (ICT), history, geography, modern foreign languages, art and design, music, physical education (PE) and citizenship. In Wales, children learn Welsh.

In some primary schools in Wales, all the lessons are taught in Welsh. In Scotland, pupils follow a broad curriculum informed by national guidance. Schools must, by law, provide religious education (RE) to all pupils. Parents are allowed to withdraw their children from these lessons. RE lessons have a Christian basis but children also learn about the other major religions.

Assessment

In England, the curriculum is divided into four stages, called Key Stages. After each stage children are tested. They take Key Stage tests (also called SATs) at ages 7, 11 and 14. At 16 they usually take the General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) in several subjects, although some schools also offer other qualifications. At 18, young people who have stayed at school do AGCEs (Advanced GCE levels) often just called A levels.

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In Wales, schools follow the Welsh National Curriculum but have abolished national tests for children at age 7 and 11. There are also plans in Wales to stop testing children at 14. Teachers in Wales still have to assess and report on their pupils' progress and achievements at 7 and 11.

In Scotland, the curriculum is divided into two phases. The first phase is from 5 to 14. There are six levels in this phase, levels A to F. There are no tests for whole groups during this time. Teachers test individual children when they are ready. From 14 to 16, young people do Standard Grade. After 16 they can study at Intermediate, Higher or Advanced level. In Scotland there will soon be a single curriculum for all pupils from age 3 to age 18. This is called A Curriculum for Excellence More information can be found at:

www.acurriculumforexcellencescotland.gov.uk

Help with English

If your child's main language is not English, the school may arrange for extra language support from an EAL (English Additional Language) specialist teacher.

Careers education

All children get careers advice from the age of 14. Advice is also available from Connexions, a national service for young people telephone 080 800 13219 or: www.connexions-direct.com in England. In Wales, Careers Wales offers advice to children from the age of 11. For further information visit: www.careerswales.com or telephone 0800 100 900.

In Scotland, Careers Scotland provides information, services and support to all ages and stages. For further information visit www.careers-scotland.org.uk or telephone 0845 8 502 502.

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Parents and schools

Many parents are involved with their child's school. A number of places on a school's governing body are reserved for parents. The governing body decides how the school is run and administered and produces reports on the progress of the school from year to year. In Scotland, parents can be members of school boards or parent councils.

Schools must be open 190 days a year; Term dates are decided by the governing body or by the local education authority. Children must attend the whole school year. Schools expect parents and guardians to inform them if their child is going to be absent from school. All schools ask parents to sign a home-school agreement. This is a list of things that both the school and the parent or guardian agree to do to ensure a good education for the child. All parents receive a report every year on their child's progress. They also have the chance to go to the school to talk to their child's teachers.

Further education and adult education

At 16, young people can leave school or stay on to do A levels (Higher grades in Scotland) in preparation for university. Some young people go to their local further education (FE) college to improve their exam grades or to get new qualifications for a career. Most courses are free up to the age of 19. Young people from families with low incomes can get financial help with their studies when they leave school at 16. This is called the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA). Information about this is available at your local college or at: www.dfes.gov.uk .

Further education colleges also offer courses to adults over the age of 18. These include courses for people wishing to improve their skills in English. These courses are called ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages). There are also courses for English speakers who need to improve their

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literacy and numeracy and for people who need to learn new skills for employment. ESOL courses are also available in community centres and training centres. There is sometimes a waiting list for ESOL courses because demand is high. In England and Wales, ESOL, literacy and numeracy courses are also called Skills for Life courses. You can get information at your local college or local library or from learndirect on 0800 100 900.

Many people join other adult education classes to learn a new skill or hobby and to meet new people. Classes are very varied and range from sports to learning a musical instrument or a new language. Details are usually available from your local library, college or adult education centre.

University

More young people go to university now than in the past. Many go after A levels (or Higher grades in Scotland) at age 18 but it is also possible to go to university later in life. At present, most students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland have to pay towards the cost of their tuition fees and to pay for their living expenses. In Scotland there are no tuition fees but after students finish university they pay back some of the cost of their education in a payment called an endowment. At present, universities can charge up to £3,000 per year for their tuition fees, but students do not have to pay anything towards their fees before or during their studies. The government pays their tuition fees and then charges for them when a student starts working after university. Some families on low incomes receive help with their children's tuition fees. This is called a grant. The universities also give help, in the form of bursaries. Most students get a low-interest student loan from a bank. This pays for their living costs while they are at university. When a student finishes university and starts working, he or she must pay back the loan.

Chapter 5 section 6

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Leisure

Information

Information about theatre, cinema, music and exhibitions is found in local newspapers, local libraries and tourist information offices. Many museums and art galleries are free

Film, video and DVD

Films in the UK have a system to show if they are suitable for children. This is called the classification system. If a child is below the age of the classification, they should not watch the film at a cinema or on DVD. All films receive a classification, as follows

U (Universal): suitable for anyone aged 4 years and over.

PG (parental guidance): suitable for everyone but some parts of the film might be unsuitable for children. Their parents should decide.

12 or 12a : children under 12 are not allowed to see or rent the film unless they are with an adult.

15 : children under 15 are not allowed to see or rent the film.

18 :no one under 18 is allowed to see or rent the film.

R18 : no one under 18 is allowed to see the film, which is only available in specially licensed cinemas.

Television and radio

Anyone in the UK with a television (TV), DVD or video recorder, computer or any device which is used for watching or recording TV programmes must be covered by a valid television licence. One licence covers all of the equipment

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at one address, but people who rent different rooms in a shared house must each buy a separate licence.

A colour TV licence currently costs £ 131.50 (2006) and lasts for 12 months. People aged 75, or over can apply for a free TV licence. Blind people can claim a 50% discount on their TV licence. You risk prosecution and a fine if you watch TV but are not covered by a TV licence. There are many ways to buy a TV licence including from local Pay Point outlets or on-line at www.tvlicensing.co.uk . It is also possible to pay for the licence in instalments. For more information telephone 0870 576 3763 or write to TV Licensing, Bristol BS98 1TL.

Sports, clubs and societies

Information about local clubs and societies can usually be found at local libraries or through your local authority. For information about sports you should ask in the local leisure centre. Libraries and leisure centres often organise activities for children during the school holidays.

Places of interest

The UK has a large network of public footpaths in the countryside. Many parts of the countryside and places of interest are kept open by the National Trust. This is a charity that works to preserve important buildings and countryside in the UK. Information about National Trust buildings and areas open to the public is available on: www.nationaltrust.org.uk .

Pubs and night clubs

Public houses, or pubs, are an important part of social life in the UK. To drink alcohol in a pub you must be 18 or over. People under 18 are not allowed to buy alcohol in a supermarket or in an off-licence either. The landlord of the pub may allow people of 14 to come into the pub but they are not allowed to

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drink. At 16, people can drink wine or beer with a meal in a hotel or restaurant.

Pubs are usually open during the day and until 11 p.m. If a pub wants to stay open later, it must apply for a special licence. Night clubs open and close later than pubs.

Betting and gambling

People under 18 are not allowed into betting shops or gambling clubs. There is a National Lottery for which draws, with large prizes, are made every week. You can enter by buying a ticket or a scratch card. People under 16 are not allowed to buy a lottery ticket or scratch card.

Pets

Many people in the UK have pets such as cats and dogs. It is against the law to treat a pet cruelly or to neglect it. All dogs in public places must wear a collar showing the name and address of the owner. The owner is responsible for keeping the dog under control and for cleaning up after the animal in a public place. Vaccinations and medical treatment for animals are available from veterinary surgeons (vets). If you cannot afford to pay a vet, you can go to a charity called the PDSA (People's Dispensary for Sick Animals). To find your nearest branch, visit www.pdsa.org.uk.

Chapter 5 section 7

Travel and transport

Trains, buses and coaches

For information about trains telephone the National Rail Enquiry Service 08457 48 49 50, or visit www.nationalrail.co.uk. For trains in Northern Ireland, phone Translink on 028 90 66 66 30 or visit: www.translink.co.uk. For

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information about local bus times phone 0870 608 250. For information on coaches, telephone National Express on 08705 80 80 80, or visit www.nationalexpress.com. For coaches in Scotland, telephone Scottish Citylink on 08705 50 50 50 or visit: www.citylink.co.uk. For Northern Ireland, visit: www.translink.co.uk.

Usually, tickets for trains and underground systems such as the London Underground must be bought before you get on the train. The fare varies according to the day and time you wish to travel. Travelling in the rush hour is always more expensive. Discount tickets are available for families, people aged 60 and over, disabled people, students and people under 26. Ask at your local train station for details. Failure to buy a ticket may result in a penalty.

Taxis

To operate legally, all taxis and minicabs must be licensed and display a licence plate. Taxis and cabs with no licence are not insured for fare-paying passengers and are not always safe. Women should not use unlicensed minicabs.

Driving

You must be at least 17 to drive a car or motorcycle, 18 to drive a medium-sized lorry, and 21 to drive a large lorry or bus. To drive a lorry, minibus or bus with more than eight passenger seats, you must have a special licence.

The driving licence

You must have a driving licence to drive on public roads. To get a driving licence you must pass a test. There are many driving schools where you can learn with the help of a qualified instructor.

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You get a full driving licence in three stages:

- Apply for a provisional licence. You need this licence while you are learning to drive. With this you are allowed to drive a motorcycle up to 125cc or a car. You must put L plates on the vehicle, or D plates in Wales. Learner drivers cannot drive on a motorway. If you drive a car, you must be with someone who is over 21 and who has had a full licence for over three years. You can get an application form for a provisional licence from a post office.
- Pass a written theory test.
- Pass a practical driving test.

Drivers may use their licence until they are 70. After that the licence is valid for three years at a time.

In Northern Ireland, a newly-qualified driver must display an R-Plate (for registered driver) for one year after passing the test.

Overseas licences

If your driving licence is from a country in the European Union (EU), Iceland, Liechtenstein or Norway, you can drive in the UK for as long as your licence is valid.

If you have a licence from a country outside the EU, you may use it in the UK for up to 12 months. During this time you must get a UK provisional driving licence and pass both the UK theory and practical driving tests, or you will not be able to drive after 12 months.

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Insurance

It is a criminal offence to have a car without proper motor insurance. Drivers without insurance can receive very high fines. It is also illegal to allow someone to use your car if they are not insured to drive it.

Road tax and MOT

You must also pay a tax to drive your car on the roads. This is called road tax. Your vehicle must have a road tax disc which shows you have paid. You can buy this at the post office. If you do not pay the road tax, your vehicle may be clamped or towed away.

If your vehicle is over three years old, you must take it every year for a Ministry of Transport (MOT) test. You can do this at an approved garage. The garage will give you an MOT certificate when your car passes the test. It is an offence not to have an MOT certificate. If you do not have an MOT certificate, your insurance will not be valid.

Safety

Everyone in a vehicle should wear a seat belt Children under 12 years of age may need a special booster seat Motorcyclists and their passengers must wear a crash helmet (this law does not apply to Sikh men if they are wearing a turban). It is illegal to drive while holding a mobile phone.

Speed limits

For cars and motorcycles the speed limits are

30 miles per hour (mph) in built-up areas, unless a sign shows a different limit

60 mph on single carriageways

70 mph on motorways and dual carriageways

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Speed limits are lower for buses, lorries and cars pulling caravans

It is illegal to drive when you are over the alcohol limit or drunk. The police can stop you and give you a test to see how much alcohol you have in your body. This is called a breathalyser test. If a driver has more than the permitted amount of alcohol (called being 'over the limit') or refuses to take the test, he or she will be arrested. People who drink and drive can expect to be disqualified from driving for a long period.

Accidents

If you are involved in a road accident

- don't drive away without stopping-this is a criminal offence
- call the police and ambulance on 999 or 112 if someone is injured
- get the names, addresses, vehicle registration numbers and insurance details of the other drivers
- give your details to the other drivers or passengers and to the police
- make a note of everything that happened and contact your insurance company as soon as possible

Note that if you admit the accident was your fault, the insurance company may refuse to pay. It is better to wait until the insurance company decides for itself whose fault the accident was.

Identity documents

At present, UK citizens do not have to carry identity (ID) cards. The government is, however, making plans to introduce them in the next few years.

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Proving your identity

You may have to prove your identity at different times, such as when you open a bank account, rent accommodation, enrol for a college course, hire a car, apply for benefits such as housing benefit, or apply for a marriage certificate. Different organisations may ask for different documents as proof of identity. These can include

- official documents from the Home Office showing your immigration status
- a certificate of identity
- a passport or travel document
- a National Insurance (NI) number card
- a provisional or full driving licence
- a recent gas, electricity or phone bill showing your name and address
- a rent or benefits book.

Chapter 6 section 1

Looking for work

If you are looking for work, or you are thinking of changing your job, there are a number of ways you can find out about work opportunities. The Home Office provides guidance on who is allowed to work in the UK. Not everyone in the UK is allowed to work and some people need work permits, so it is important to check your status before taking up work. Also, employers have to check that anyone they employ is legally entitled to work in the UK. For more information and guidance, see the Home Office website 'Working in the UK' - www.workingintheuk.gov.uk .

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Jobs are usually advertised in local and national newspapers, at the local Jobcentre and in employment agencies. You can find the address and telephone number of your local Jobcentre under Jobcentre Plus in the phone book or see www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk. Some jobs are advertised on supermarket notice boards and in shop windows. These jobs are usually part-time and the wages are often quite low. If there are particular companies you would like to work for, you can look for vacancies on their websites.

Jobcentre Plus is run by a government department-the Department for Work and Pensions. Trained staff give advice and help in finding and applying for jobs as well claiming benefits. They can also arrange for interpreters. Their website www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk lists vacancies and training opportunities and gives general information on benefits. There is also a low cost telephone service- Jobseeker Direct, 0845 60 60 234. This is open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. on weekdays and 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturdays.

Qualifications

Applicants for some jobs need special training or qualifications. If you have qualifications from another country, you can find out how they compare with qualifications in the UK at the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC), www.naric.org.uk.

For further information contact UK NARIC, ECCTIS Ltd, Oriel House, Oriel Road, Cheltenham Glos, GL50 1XP telephone 0870 990 4088, email: info@naric.org.uk.

Applications

Interviews for lower paid and local jobs can often be arranged by telephone or in person. For many jobs you need to fill in an application form or send a copy of your curriculum vitae (CV) with a covering letter or letter of application.

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A covering letter is usually a short letter attached to a completed application form, while a letter of application gives more detailed information on why you are applying for the job and why you think you are suitable. Your CV gives specific details on your education, qualifications, previous employment, skills and interests. It is important to type any letters and your CV on a computer or word processor as this improves your chance of being called for an interview.

Employers often ask for the names and addresses of one or two referees. These are people such as your current or previous employer or college tutor. Referees need to know you well and to agree to write a short report or reference on your suitability for the job. Personal friends or members of your family are not normally acceptable as referees.

Interviews

In job descriptions and interviews, employers should give full details of what the job involves, including the pay, holidays and working conditions. If you need more information about any of these, you can ask questions in the interview. In fact, asking some questions in the interview shows you are interested and can improve your chance of getting the job.

When you are applying for a job and during the interview, it is important to be honest about your qualifications and experience. If an employer later finds out that you gave incorrect information, you might lose your job.

Criminal record

For some jobs, particularly if the work involves working with children or vulnerable people, the employer will ask for your permission to do a criminal record check. You can get more information on this from the Home Office Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) information line, telephone 0870 90 90 811. In Scotland, contact Disclosure Scotland www.disclosurescotland.co.uk
Helpline: 0870 609 6006.

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Training

Taking up training helps people improve their qualifications for work. Some training may be offered at work or you can do courses from home or at your local college. This includes English language training. You can get more information from your local library and college or from websites such as www.worktrain.gov.uk and www.learndirect.co.uk. Learndirect offers a range of online training courses at centres across the country. There are charges for courses but you can do free starter or taster sessions. You can get more information from their free information and advice line: 0800 100 900.

Volunteering and work experience

Some people do voluntary work and this can be a good way to support your local community and organisations which depend on volunteers. It also provides useful experience that can help with future job applications. Your local library will have information about volunteering opportunities.

Chapter 6 section 2

Equal rights and discrimination

You can also get information and advice from websites such as: www.do-it.org.uk, www.volunteering.org.uk and www.justdosomething.net. It is against the law for employers to discriminate against someone at work. This means that a person should not be refused work, training or promotion or treated less favourably because of their:

- sex
- nationality, race, colour or ethnic group
- disability

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- religion
- sexual orientation
- age.

In Northern Ireland, the law also bans discrimination on grounds of religious belief or political opinion.

The law also says that men and women who do the same job, or work of equal value, should receive equal pay. Almost all the laws protecting people at work apply equally to people doing part-time or full-time jobs.

There are, however, a small number of jobs where discrimination laws do not apply. For example, discrimination is not against the law when the job involves working for someone in their own home.

You can get more information about the law and racial discrimination from the Commission for Racial Equality. The Equal Opportunities Commission can help with sex discrimination issues and the Disability Rights Commission deals with disability issues. Each of these organisations offers advice and information and can, in some cases, support individuals. From October 2007 their functions will be brought together in a new Commission for Equality and Human Rights. You can get more information about the laws protecting people at work from the Citizens Advice Bureau website:

www.adviceguide.org.uk .

In Northern Ireland, the Equality Commission provides information and advice in respect of all forms of unlawful discrimination.

The Commission for Racial Equality, St Dunstan's House, 201-211 Borough High Street, London, SE11 1GZ, telephone: 020 7939 000, fax 020 7939 0001, www.cre.gov.uk

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The Equal Opportunities Commission, Arndale House, Arndale Centre,
Manchester M4 3EQ, telephone: 0845 601 5901, fax: 0161 838 8312,
www.eoc.org.uk

The Disability Rights Commission, DRC Helpline, FREEPOST MID02164,
Stratford upon Avon CV37 9BR, telephone: 08457 622 633, fax 08457 778
878, www.drc.org.uk

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, Equality House,
7 -9 Shaftesbury Square, Belfast BT2 7DP, telephone: 028 90 500600,
www.equalityni.org

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment can take different forms. This includes

- indecent remarks
- comments about the way you look that make you feel uncomfortable or humiliated
- comments or questions about your sex life
- inappropriate touching or sexual demands
- bullying behaviour or being treated in a way that is rude, hostile, degrading or humiliating because of your sex

Men and women can be victims of sexual harassment at work. If this happens to you, tell a friend, colleague or trade union representative and ask the person harassing you to stop. It is a good idea to keep a written record of what happened, the days and times when it happened and who else may have seen or heard the harassment. If the problem continues, report the

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person to your employer or trade union. Employers are responsible for the behaviour of their employees while they are at work. They should treat complaints of sexual harassment very seriously and take effective action to deal with the problem. If you are not satisfied with your employer's response, you can ask for advice and support from the Equal Opportunities Commission, your trade union or the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Chapter 6 section 3

At work

Both employers and employees have legal responsibilities at work. Employers have to pay employees for the work that they do, treat them fairly and take responsible care for their health and safety. Employees should do their work with reasonable skill and care and follow all reasonable instructions. They should not damage their employer's business.

A written contract or statement

Within two months of starting a new job, your employer should give you a written contract or statement with all the details and conditions for your work. This should include your responsibilities, pay, working hours, holidays, sick pay and pension. It should also include the period of notice that both you and your employer should give for the employment to end. The contract or written statement is an important document and is very useful if there is ever a disagreement about your work, pay or conditions.

Pay, hours and holidays

Your pay is agreed between you and your employer. There is a minimum wage in the UK that is a legal right for every employed person above compulsory school leaving age. The compulsory school leaving age is 16, but

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the time in the school year when 16-year-olds can leave school in England and Wales is different from that in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

- There are different minimum wage rates for different age groups From October 2006 the rates are as follows
- for workers aged 22 and above -£5.35 an hour
- for 18 -21 year olds £4.45 an hour
- for 16 -17 year olds £3.30 an hour

Employers who pay their workers less than this are breaking the law. You can get more information from the Central Office of Information Directgov website, www.direct.gov.uk which has a wide range of public service information. Alternatively, you can telephone the National Minimum Wage Helpline, telephone 0845 600 0678.

Your contract or statement will show the number of hours you are expected to work. Your employer might ask you if you can work more hours than this and it is your decision whether or not you do. Your employer cannot require you to work more hours than the hours agreed on your contract.

If you need to be absent from work, for example if you are ill or you have a medical appointment, it is important to tell your employer as soon as you can in advance. Most employees who are 16 or over are entitled to at least four weeks, paid holiday every year. This includes time for national holidays. Your employer must give you a pay slip, or a similar written statement, each time you are paid. This must show exactly how much money has been taken off for tax and national insurance contributions.

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Tax

For most people, tax is automatically taken from their earnings by the employer and paid directly to HM Revenue and Customs, the government department responsible for collecting taxes. If you are self-employed, you need to pay your own tax. Money raised from income tax pays for government services such as roads, education, police and the armed forces. Occasionally HM Revenue and Customs sends out tax return forms which ask for full financial details. If you receive one, it is important to complete it and return the form as soon as possible. You can get help and advice from the HM Revenue and Customs self-assessment helpline, on: 0845 300 45 55.

National Insurance

Almost everybody in the UK who is in paid work, including self-employed people, must pay National Insurance (NI) contributions. Money raised from NI contributions is used to pay contributory benefits such as the State Retirement Pension and helps fund the National Health Service. Employees have their NI contributions deducted from their pay by their employer every week or month. People who are self-employed need to pay NI contributions themselves. Class 2 contributions, either by direct debit or every three months and Class 4 contributions on the profits from their trade or business. Class 4 contributions are paid alongside their income tax. Anyone who does not pay enough NI contributions will not be able to receive certain benefits, such as Jobseeker's Allowance or Maternity Pay, and may not receive a full state retirement pension.

Getting a National Insurance number

Just before their 16 th birthday, all young people in the UK are sent a National Insurance number. This is a unique number for each person and it tracks their National Insurance contributions.

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Refugees whose asylum applications have been successful have the same rights to work as any other UK citizen and to receive a National Insurance number. People who have applied for asylum and have not received a positive decision do not usually have permission to work and so do not get a National Insurance number.

You need a National Insurance number when you start work. If you do not have a National Insurance number, you can apply for one through Jobcentre Plus or your local Social Security Office. It is a good idea to make an appointment by telephone and ask which documents you need to take with you. You usually need to show your birth certificate, passport and Home Office documents allowing you to stay in the country. If you need information about registering for a National Insurance number, you can telephone the National Insurance Registrations Helpline on 0845 91 57006 or 0845 91 55670.

Pensions

Everyone in the UK who has paid enough National Insurance contributions will get a State Pension when they retire. The State Pension age for men is currently 65 years of age and for women it is 60, but the State Pension age for women will increase to 65 in stages between 2010 and 2020. You can find full details of the State Pension scheme on the State Pension website, www.thepensionsservice.gov.uk or you can phone the Pension Service Helpline: 08456060265

In addition to a State Pension, many people also receive a pension through their work and some also pay into a personal pension plan too. It is very important to get good advice about pensions. The Pensions Advisory Service gives free and confidential advice on occupational and personal pensions. Their helpline telephone number is 0845 601 2923 and their website address is www.opas.org.uk . Independent financial advisers can also give advice but **This material is based on "Life in the United Kingdom, A Journey to Citizenship" book and produced with the permission of Controller of HMSO (under special license C2006009709). No part of this material may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted without the written permission of HMSO's copyright unit.**

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you usually have to pay a fee for this service. You can find local financial advisers in the Yellow Pages and Thomson local guides or on the internet at www.unbiased.co.uk.

Health and safety

Employers have a legal duty to make sure the workplace is safe. Employees also have a legal duty to follow safety regulations and to work safely and responsibly. If you are worried about health and safety at your workplace, talk to your supervisor, manager or trade union representative. You need to follow the right procedures and your employer must not dismiss you or treat you unfairly for raising a concern.

Trade unions

Trade unions are organisations that aim to improve the pay and working conditions of their members. They also give their members advice and support on problems at work. You can choose whether to join a trade union or not and your employer cannot dismiss you or treat you unfairly for being a union member.

You can find details of trade unions in the UK, the benefits they offer to members and useful information on rights at work on the Trades Union Congress (TUC) website, www.tuc.org.uk.

Problems at work

If you have problems of any kind at work, speak to your supervisor, manager, trade union representative or someone else with responsibility as soon as possible. If you need to take any action, it is a good idea to get advice first. If you are a member of a trade union, your representative will help. You can also contact your local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) or Law Centre. The national Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) website,

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www.acas.org.uk gives information on your rights at work ACAS also offers a national helpline, telephone 08457 47 47 47.

Losing your job and unfair dismissal

An employee can be dismissed immediately for serious misconduct at work. Anyone who cannot do their job properly, or is unacceptably late or absent from work, should be given a warning by their employer. If their work, punctuality or attendance does not improve, the employer can give them notice to leave their job.

It is against the law for employers to dismiss someone from work unfairly. If this happens to you, or life at work is made so difficult that you feel you have to leave, you may be able to get compensation if you take your case to an Employment Tribunal. This is a court which specialises in employment matters. You normally only have three months to make a complaint.

If you are dismissed from your job, it is important to get advice on your case as soon as possible. You can ask for advice and information on your legal rights and the best action to take from your trade union representative, a solicitor, a Law Centre or the Citizen's Advice Bureau.

Redundancy

If you lose your job because the company you work for no longer needs someone to do your job, or cannot afford to employ you, you may be entitled to redundancy pay. The amount of money you receive depends on the length of time you have been employed. Again your trade union representative, a solicitor, a Law Centre or the Citizens Advice Bureau can advise you.

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Unemployment

Most people who become unemployed can claim Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). This is currently available for men aged 18-65 and women aged 18-60 who are capable of working, available for work and trying to find work.

Unemployed 16 and 17 -year-olds may not be eligible for Jobseeker's Allowance but may be able to claim a Young Person's Bridging Allowance (YPBA) instead. The local Jobcentre Plus can help with claims. You can get further information from the Citizens Advice Bureau and the Jobcentre Plus website www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk .

New Deal

New Deal is a government programme that aims to give unemployed people the help and support they need to get into work. Young people who have been unemployed for 6 months and adults who have been unemployed for 18 months are usually required to join New Deal if they wish to continue receiving benefit. There are different New Deal schemes for different age groups. You can find out more about New Deal on 0845 606 2626 or: www.newdeal.gov.uk

The government also runs work-based learning programmes which offer training to people while they are at work. People receive a wage or an allowance and can attend college for one day a week to get a new qualification.

You can find out more about the different government schemes, and the schemes in your area, from Jobcentre Plus, www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk , or your local Citizens Advice Bureau.

Chapter 6 section 4

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Working for yourself

Tax

Self-employed people are responsible for paying their own tax and National Insurance. They have to keep detailed records of what they earn and spend on the business and send their business accounts to

HM Revenue and Customs every year. Most self-employed people use an accountant to make sure they pay the correct tax and claim all the possible tax allowances.

As soon as you become self-employed you should register yourself for tax and National Insurance by ringing the HM Revenue and Customs telephone helpline for people who are self-employed, on 0845 915 4515.

Help and advice

Banks can give information and advice on setting up your own business and offer start-up loans, which need to be repaid with interest. Government grants and other financial support may be available. You can get details of these and advice on becoming self-employed from Business Link, a government-funded project for people starting or running a business- www.businesslink.gov.uk telephone: 0845 600 9 006.

Working in Europe

British citizens can work in any country that is a member of the European Economic Area (EEA). In general, they have the same employment rights as a citizen of that country or state.

Chapter 6 section 5

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Childcare and children at work

New mothers and fathers

Women who are expecting a baby have a legal right to time off work for antenatal care. They are also entitled to at least 26 weeks' maternity leave. These rights apply to full-time and part-time workers and it makes no difference how long the woman has worked for her employer. It is, however, important to follow the correct procedures and to give the employer enough notice about taking maternity leave. Some women may also be entitled to maternity pay but this depends on how long they have been working for their employer.

Fathers who have worked for their employer for at least 26 weeks are entitled to paternity leave, which provides up to two weeks' time off from work, with pay, when the child is born. It is important to tell your employer well in advance.

You can get advice and more information on maternity and paternity matters from the personnel officer at work, your trade union representative, your local Citizens Advice Bureau, the Citizens Advice Bureau website www.adviceguide.org.uk or the government website www.direct.gov.uk.

Childcare

It is Government policy to help people with childcare responsibilities to take up work. Some employers can help with this. The ChildcareLink website www.childcarelink.gov.uk gives information about different types of childcare and registered childminders in your area, or telephone 08000 96 02 96.

Hours and time for children at work

In the UK there are strict laws to protect children from exploitation and to make sure that work does not get in the way of their education. The earliest
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legal age for children to do paid work is set at 14. There are a few exceptions that allow children under the age of 14 to work legally and these include specific work in performing, modelling, sport and agriculture. In order to do any of this work, it is necessary to get a licence from the local authority.

By law, children aged 14 to 16 can only do light work. There are particular jobs they are not allowed to do and these include delivering milk, selling alcohol, cigarettes or medicines, working in a kitchen or a chip shop, working with dangerous machinery or doing any other kind of work that might cause them any kind of injury. Children who work have to get an employment card from their local authority and a medical certificate of fitness for work.

The law sets out clear limits for the working hours and times for 14-16 year-old children. Every child must have at least two consecutive weeks a year during the school holidays when they do not work. They cannot work:

- for more than 4 hours without a one-hour rest break
- for more than 2 hours on any school day or a Sunday
- before 7.a.m. or after 7.p.m.
- for more than one hour before school starts
- for more than 12 hours in any school week.

15 and 16-year-olds can work slightly more hours than 14-year-olds on a weekday when they are not at school, on Saturdays and in school holidays. The local authority has a duty to check that the law is obeyed. If it believes that a young person is working illegally, it can order that the young person is no longer employed. You can find more information on the TUC website, www.worksmart.org.uk.

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