



**BRIEFING PAPER**

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# Constituency Casework: Honours

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## Summary

Honours are awarded by the Queen, on recommendation from the Prime Minister or other senior Government ministers.

Many nominations for honours are made by the general public. Nominations are considered by specialist committees of experts, in a subject area, then forwarded to a Main Committee for further review. Recommendations then go to Ministers and to the Monarch.

Some checks are carried out on nominees to ensure the honours system is not brought into disrepute. More information about the checks came into the public domain in September 2018. Honours lists are published at least twice a year, in the official *London Gazette*.

Members of Parliament receive many questions about how their constituents can nominate someone for an honour. They also receive comments about the award of honours and the length of time taken to consider a nomination.

There is a process known for removal of an honour, known as forfeiture. An official Forfeiture Committee looks into those who may be considered unworthy to retain an honour. On their advice, the Sovereign may cancel an award and notification of this would be given in the *London Gazette*.

The process for award of peerages (members of the House of Lords) is different. More information on peerages can be found in House of Commons Library Briefing Paper [Peerage creations since 1997](#). More information on award of military medals can be found in House of Commons Library Briefing Paper [How to apply for a military medal](#).

The modern honours system, involving the Order of the British Empire, was established in 1917. Almost from that beginning there was controversy about who should receive an honour. Details on recent reviews of the honours system and more information on political honours are available in Commons Library Briefing Paper SN0283, [Honours: History and reviews](#).

# 1. What are honours?

The honours system is a way to recognise people who have:

- made achievements in public life
- committed themselves to serving and helping Britain.

The people honoured will usually have made life better for other people or be outstanding at what they do.

Award of an honour provides a way to publicly recognise exceptional service or achievement. Honours are generally highly valued by the recipients, and by their families, friends and local communities.

Honours are awarded by the Queen, but the majority are on recommendations made to her from the Prime Minister or other senior Government Ministers.

These recommendations arise from nominations, made by organisations or members of the general public, who are familiar with the work of the candidate. Who gets an honour, and the honour they get, is decided by one of a number of subject based honours committees. These committees advise the Prime Minister. The types of honours awarded are set out in Box 1 below.

## 1.1 What are the main types of honour?

The main different types of honours, can be summarised as:

### **Companion of Honour**

This is awarded for having a major contribution to the arts, science, medicine, or government lasting over a long period of time. There is a limit of 65 holders of the honour at any time. The Order was founded in 1917.

The Companion of Honour has precedence above the Order of the British Empire.

Most awards are in the Order of the British Empire.

### **Knight/Dame**

This is awarded for having a major contribution in any activity, usually at national level. Other people working in the nominee's area will see their contribution as inspirational and significant, requiring commitment over a long period of time.

Most awards of Knight/Dame are in the Order of the British Empire, but there are also the Order of the Bath and the Order of St Michael and St George.

*(see Box 2 for who is eligible for each Order).*

### **Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE)**

This is awarded for having a prominent but lesser role at national level, or a leading role at regional level. You can also get one for a distinguished, innovative contribution to any area.

### **Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE)**

This is awarded for having a major local role in any activity, including people whose work has made them known nationally in their chosen area.

### **Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE)**

Achievement or service in and to the community which is outstanding in its field and has delivered sustained and real impact which stands out as an example to others.

**British Empire Medal (BEM)**

Achievement or contribution of a very “hands-on” service to the community in a local geographical area. This might take the form of sustained commitment in support of very local charitable and/or voluntary activity; or innovative work that has delivered real impact but that is relatively short (three to four years) in duration.<sup>1</sup>

**Order of Merit**

The sole gift of the Sovereign and limited to 24 members at any one time. It rewards those who have achieved greatly in the arts, learning, literature and science. The OM confers no precedence on its recipients.

There are also a number of awards for bravery displayed by civilians:

**The George Cross**

First level civilian medal for bravery: for acts of heroism and courage in extreme danger.

**The George Medal**

Second level civilian medal for bravery: for acts of great bravery.

**The Queen’s Gallantry Medal**

Third level civilian medal for bravery: for inspiring acts of bravery.

**The Queen’s Commendation for Bravery and The Queen’s Commendation for Bravery in the Air**

For risk to life and displays of bravery.

## 1.2 How did the honours system develop?

Most honours awarded in the current system are part of the Order of the British Empire. Formally speaking it is one of the orders of chivalry, some of which date back to the middle ages, for example the Order of the Garter.

The Order of the British Empire was founded by King George V in 1917, as a way to recognise the service, voluntary and otherwise, delivered by non-combatants in connection with the First World War. In 1918 the Order was split into civil and military divisions.

A number of other honours, including the Order of Merit and those in the Royal Victorian Order, which applies to the Royal Household only, are in the personal gift of the Queen.

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<sup>1</sup> [The Honours System: types of honours and awards](#), Gov.uk,

## 2. Nomination and award of honours

### 2.1 Who can be nominated for which type of honour?

Order	Who can be nominated
Order of the Bath	Senior civil servants and military officers
Order of St Michael and St George	Diplomats and people serving the UK abroad
Order of the British Empire	Anyone
Companion of Honour (award)	Anyone
Royal Victorian Order	People who have served the Queen or the Monarchy in a personal way

The relevant honours committee decides which honour is appropriate.

### 2.2 What can you get an honour for?

The government provides guidance on the honours system. This sets out why people might get an award.

People get honours for achievements like:

- making a difference to their community or field of work
- enhancing Britain's reputation
- long-term voluntary service
- innovation and entrepreneurship
- changing things, with an emphasis on achievement
- improving life for people less able to help themselves
- displaying moral courage

Honours are given to people involved in fields including:

- community, voluntary and local services
- arts and media
- health
- sport
- education
- science and technology
- business and the economy
- civil or political service<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> [The Honours System](#), Gov.uk, accessed 22 March 2016

## 2.3 Nominations

### Who can make a nomination?

Anyone can nominate someone for an honour, but the system does not support self-nominations.

Many nominations are made by members of the public or by an organisation familiar with the work of an individual. A Government department may also nominate a person doing good work in its sphere of interest.

The nomination process is set out on the Gov.uk/honours website, with links to the nomination form and guidance on completing this.<sup>3</sup>

Nominations for civilian gallantry awards can also be made by the public, or by professional bodies. There is no dedicated gallantry form, but the standard nomination form may be used.

### What evidence is required when writing a nomination?

The Cabinet Office guidance advises that there is no set way to write a nomination. The guidance stresses the need for the nominator to have personal knowledge of the candidate for an honour and to provide evidence of exceptional achievement.

The most important thing is to provide evidence of what they've done and how they've made things better for others.

Your nomination form doesn't need to be a work of art – it doesn't matter whether it's typed or handwritten or whether it has pictures. There isn't a right way or a wrong way to write a nomination and it doesn't need to be particularly formal. There's no "right length". Every nomination is different. But your nomination must tell the story of what your candidate has done.

Give examples of how they have demonstrated outstanding quality.

The guidance also points out the importance of exceptional achievement, not just someone doing their job:

a frequent complaint from committees is that the person recommended is "doing no more than their job" or "doing nothing that stands out".

Instead, your citation should describe what is special about your candidate's achievements and show memorably and persuasively how and where they have made a difference.

The nominations process for UK residents is managed by the Honours and Appointments Secretariat, part of the Cabinet Office government department. They are also able to provide advice on how the process works.

### Can someone from abroad be nominated for an honour?

If the candidate for an honour lives abroad, they can still be nominated. If they are a British citizen, the process will be as described above. If they are

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<sup>3</sup> [The Honours System-How to write a nomination](#), Gov.uk, accessed 22 March 2016.

not a British citizen, they may be given an honorary award. These nominations are managed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Details on the [FCO nomination guidance](#) are on the Gov.uk website.

## Can an honour be awarded posthumously?

The person nominated must still be actively involved in the activity for which they are being nominated. Honours in the Orders of Knighthood, including Order of the British Empire, can only be awarded to living nominees. Awards for gallantry can be awarded after death of the nominee.

This was confirmed in the answer to a Parliamentary Question on 30 June 2014:

**Lord Ashcroft** To ask Her Majesty's Government whether any gallantry awards other than the Victoria Cross and the George Cross can be awarded posthumously.

**Lord Wallace of Saltaire (LD):** All military and civilian gallantry awards may be awarded posthumously; honours made in the Orders of Knighthood may not be awarded posthumously.<sup>4</sup>

In the Birthday Honours of June 2014, the charity activist Stephen Sutton was listed with the award of MBE, for services to the Teenage Cancer Trust. Stephen Sutton had died on 14 May 2014, having already accepted the award. In the Honours List it was specified that the award was to be dated as having been made on 14 May 2014.

The Press Notice accompanying the Honours List explained this award:

There is also an MBE for Stephen Sutton for his services to the Teenage Cancer Trust, sadly backdated to the date of his death. Stephen had accepted the proposed award, and for this reason his MBE is recorded alongside others in the Birthday Honours list. It is clear that Stephen touched and inspired a huge number of people and that his ambassadorial work for the Teenage Cancer Trust was greatly appreciated by all those he helped.<sup>5</sup>

## Can a Member of Parliament make a nomination?

Constituents may write to their MP requesting that someone be nominated or asking for support for a nomination. An MP may make a nomination, as with any member of the public. The MP would have to be familiar with the work or voluntary role the candidate is carrying out.

As part of the nomination process at least two letters of support are required to accompany a completed nomination form. An MP may be asked to submit one of these. The guidance does state:

Letters of support should be provided from people with first-hand knowledge of the nominee who can endorse their contribution or supply additional information.

<sup>4</sup> [PQ HL659 \[on Medals\]](#), 30 June 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Cabinet Office Press Release, [The Queen's Birthday Honours 2014](#), 13 June 2014.



## 2.4 Decisions and awards

The overall nominations process is managed by the Honours and Appointments Secretariat, part of the Cabinet Office.

### Who decides on award of an honour?

Nominations are considered by an independent committee of experts in the field of work. There are currently nine specialist committees. There is also a Main Honours Committee, which makes the final selections and deals with overall policy. Committees are made up of civil servants and a majority of independent members. There is more information on the Direct Gov website, including the membership of the Main Committee and the specialist committees.<sup>6</sup>

### How are nominees checked?

Each nomination is handled differently. But usually the merit of nominees is assessed by taking views from government departments; regulatory bodies; professional bodies and Lord Lieutenants (who represent the Queen in local areas).

Some checking of nominees, with regard to probity and propriety, is carried out, across government Departments. This is to minimise the risk that an award could bring the honours system into disrepute. This is described in the official guidance as:

We protect the integrity of the honours system by carrying out probity checks with a number of Government departments before names are submitted to the Prime Minister and HM the Queen for approval.

As part of this vetting process, HM Revenue and Customs may advise the Honours and Appointments Secretariat about any potential risk posed to HM Government and the Crown by honours candidates, by reference to a low, medium or high rating.

The ACRO Criminal Records Office may also provide information held about an honours nominee or an honours request.<sup>7</sup>

Further information about the checking procedures was put into the public domain, [consequent on a decision](#) delivered by The Information Commissioner.<sup>8</sup> This was the result of an application made by *The Times*, under the *Freedom of Information Act*. *The Times* published several articles based on this decision and stated that tax avoiders could be prevented from getting knighthoods and other honours, based on the official position that “poor tax behaviour is not consistent with the award of an honour”.<sup>9</sup>

The Information Commissioner ordered the Cabinet Office to publish the operational memorandum of understanding with HRMC and the

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<sup>6</sup> [Honours committees](#), Gov.uk, accessed 22 March 2016

<sup>7</sup> [How the honours system works](#), Gov.uk, published 5 September 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Information Commissioner’s Office, *Freedom of Information Act 2000 Decision Notice, FS50731157*, 20 August 2018.

<sup>9</sup> “Tax avoiders blocked from honours in secret memo: HMRC ‘traffic light’ warnings seen for first time, *Times*, 1 September 2018, p1. [further articles pp8-9, p27]

information sharing agreement with the National Police Chief's Council. These agreements were added to the Gov.uk website in September 2018.<sup>10</sup>  
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## How are decisions made on recommendations?

The honours committees send recommendations to the main committee. The Main Honours Committee meets twice a year, but its discussions are not made public because of its confidential nature.

The Main Honours Committee considers the balance of the proposals and forwards its recommendations to the Cabinet Secretary who, in turn, submits the list to the Prime Minister for submission to The Queen.

The Prime Minister's List includes knighthoods, CBEs, OBEs and MBEs. The Foreign Secretary submits the Diplomatic Service and Overseas List, and the Secretary of State for Defence submits the Defence Services list. The Prime Minister's List is much the largest.

There is a specific exemption in the *Freedom of Information Act 2000* covering the conferral of honours and dignities by the Crown (Section 37). This can allow for information about the honours process to be withheld, in response to an FOI request. Some exceptions to this were decided upon by the Information Commissioner, in August 2018.

## How long does it take to consider a nomination?

A person or organisation submitting a nomination will receive an acknowledgement from the relevant Government Department secretariat. They may also be asked by the honours committee to supply further evidence to support or clarify the nomination.

The process of consideration can take 12 or 18 months, so a nominator may not hear anything for quite a while.

If a nomination is not successful, the nominator will not automatically be informed. But if an award has not been announced after around two years after the nomination was made, the nominator can assume that the nomination has probably been unsuccessful.

Nominators are welcome to submit further information about their nominee at any time and the Honours and Appointments Secretariat is happy to discuss cases with the nominator and advise whether a case is still active.

## How does a recipient know they are to receive an honour?

Recipients are notified by letter that the Queen intends to award them an honour. They are asked to respond to accept formally.

Recipients are also asked not to disclose the award until details are published in an honours list, as this information is confidential.

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<sup>10</sup> [Memorandum of understanding between HMRC and the Cabinet Office](#), 21 March 2017, gov.uk, (accessed 18 September 2018).

<sup>11</sup> [Information sharing agreement between NPCC and Cabinet Office Honours and Appointments Secretariat](#), gov.uk, 6 April 2018 (accessed 19 September 2018).

Recipients are not informed who has made a nomination. Nominators are not told in advance that the nomination has been successful.

### How are honours made public?

Honours Lists are published at least twice a year, in June for the Queen's Official Birthday and in December for New Year. Additional honours lists may be published. As part of the process of establishing a new government following a General Election, a Dissolution Honours List, nominated by the Prime Minister, may be issued.

Honours Lists are officially published in the *London Gazette*. They are also issued to the press, both national and local and are available on the Gov.uk website. Provision of the information in a searchable spreadsheet means that local and specialist publications can identify recipients and write articles to highlight the achievements of people who have been awarded honours.

### How does a recipient receive an honour?

People awarded an honour receive the decoration in a ceremony known as an investiture. This is usually carried out by a member of the Royal Family, in an event which takes place in Buckingham Palace or another Royal residence.

Occasionally an award can be made by the Queen's local representative, the Lord-Lieutenant of a County, perhaps if a recipient is not well enough to attend an investiture. British Empire Medallists receive their medals from their Lord-Lieutenant and are also invited to attend a Royal Garden Party.

Arrangements [for investiture are made by the Royal Household](#). Further details and some individual stories can be found on the Royal Family website ([www.royal.uk](http://www.royal.uk)).

### When can someone start to use an honour as title?

There can sometimes be a gap of a few months between the announcement of an honour and the investiture by a member of the Royal Family. Recipients are entitled to use the title (Knight or Dame, and Orders of the British Empire) and relevant post-nominal letters, as soon as these are announced in the London Gazette. They do not have to wait until after the investiture.

## 2.5 Refusal of honours

It is up to the person nominated for an honour to decide whether to accept.

### Can an honour be declined?

The level of refusal is quite low, but information on this is rarely made public. A review by of the honours system was conducted in 2000 and subsequently some of the research was made available to Parliament. Part of this gave information on the level of refusal. The very low rate of refusal

(2% per list) was taken as a good indication that the differentiation of honours into various levels is generally considered to be acceptable. Some people decline because of the reference to “Empire” in the Order’s name and calls to modernise this are discussed below.

In December 2003 a list of names of those who had declined an honour was leaked to the *Sunday Times* and published by them. The government will only give the names of those on the Prime Minister’s list who have refused when an individual has been dead for at least ten years.<sup>12</sup> Other individuals may make a public declaration of the reasons for their refusal but potential recipients are asked to respect the confidentiality of the approach.<sup>13</sup>

### Can an honour be returned?

There is no official method for renouncing an honour, after it has been accepted and awarded. Any such action is always unofficial, and the record of the appointment in the *London Gazette* stands. The physical insignia can be returned to the Central Chancery of the Orders of Knighthood. But this act is purely symbolic, as replacement insignia may be purchased for a nominal sum.

Someone returning their insignia may seek publicity for this action. Examples have included John Lennon, who returned an MBE in 1969, in protest against UK involvement in the Nigeria Biafra war. The author Carla Lane, returned her OBE in 2002, in protest at the award of an honour to the managing director of Huntingdon Life Sciences. This was because the company carried out experiments on live animals.

## 2.6 Modernisation of the Order of the British Empire?

A small number of people offered an honour give a reason for refusal because of concern about association with the legacy of the British Empire.

A review of the honours system was carried out by the Commons Public Administration Select Committee and published in July 2004. This included a recommendation that the Order of the British Empire be closed and replaced by a new Order of British Excellence.<sup>14</sup> This recommendation was not accepted by the Government, because they stated that the Order played a well-understood and respected part of the honours system valued by those who were members.<sup>15</sup>

A subsequent review carried out by the Public Administration Committee in 2012 came to a different conclusion:

The reintroduction of the British Empire Medal allows for greater recognition of hundreds of people across the country who devote great time to their communities. Whilst we welcome this, the title of the honour was disliked by some witnesses, because of the connotations of the word "Empire".

<sup>12</sup> [PQ 2534 \[on honour\]](#), 18 June 2015.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Why I rejected my MBE’, *The Guardian*, 4 June 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Public Administration Committee, [A matter of honour: reforming the honours system](#), 13 July 2004, HC 212-I, 2003-4.

<sup>15</sup> [Reform of the honours system](#), Cmnd 6479, February 2005.

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We recognise that the title may need to change in the future, but recognise that this is not as straightforward as it would first appear: the name of the Order of the British Empire is enshrined in statute and cannot simply be changed: the Order itself would have to be closed. This would require fresh statutes. In recognition of the existing Order's proud history and of the service and bravery of its members, we do not recommend any changes ahead of the Order's centenary in 2017.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Public Administration Committee, [The honours system](#), 17 July 2012, HC 19-I, 2010-12.

### 3. Removal of an honour

There is a process for removal of an honour, after it has been awarded, called forfeiture.

The Sovereign may, on the advice of Ministers, cancel an award if the holder is considered unworthy to retain it. The object of forfeiture is to preserve the integrity of the honours system.

There is a Forfeiture Committee, which is an independent advisory group of senior civil servants and independent members. The Committee makes a recommendation to The Queen, through the Prime Minister. Their discussions are confidential. If an honour is forfeited, this is published in the *London Gazette*.

#### Why might an honour be removed?

An honour can be taken away if someone is:

- sentenced to prison for at least 3 months for a criminal offence
- censured or struck off by a professional or regulatory body for something directly relevant to their honour (for example a doctor being struck off).<sup>17</sup>

Other reasons for forfeiture can also be considered. The overall criterion is whether the honours system has been brought into disrepute.

More information on removal of honours and recent discussion on this can be found in Common Briefing Paper 2832, [Honours: History and Reviews](#).

#### How can a member of the public suggest that an honour be removed?

A member of the public, or an MP, may write to the Honours and Appointments Secretariat in the Cabinet Office to explain how the recipient may have brought the honours system into disrepute.

The contact details are:

Cabinet Office  
 Honours and Appointments Secretariat  
 Ground Floor  
 Room G39  
 1 Horse Guards Road  
 London  
 SW1A 2HQ

Email: [honours@cabinetoffice.gov.uk](mailto:honours@cabinetoffice.gov.uk)

#### Who is on the Forfeiture Committee?

The Forfeiture Committee, which considers removal of honours, normally includes the Head of the Home Civil Service (Chair) and the Treasury

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<sup>17</sup> Gov.uk, [Having honours taken away](#), accessed 17 May 2017.

Solicitor, with a majority of independent members. Other members of the Committee may vary, depending on cases being considered.

Since 2015 the Forfeiture Committee has been chaired, under delegated authority from the Head of the Civil Service, by Sir Jonathan Stephens, the Permanent Secretary for the Northern Ireland Office.

Freedom of Information requests from members of the public, for the records of the committee and names of those considered, have been rejected, on the grounds that this would not serve the public interest.<sup>18</sup>

### Can an honour be removed from someone who has died?

An honour cannot be awarded to a person who has died. In the same way an honour can't be removed from a person who has died since receiving the honour.

This was confirmed by the Government in March 2015, in the context of child abuse legal cases. The Minister, Lord Wallace of Saltaire stated:

It is possible to rescind an honour on the advice of the Forfeiture Committee and with the approval of the Sovereign. Forfeiture may be considered for holders of awards in civilian or military Orders of Knighthood and for those appointed Knight Bachelor. We cannot comment on whether or not specific cases are being considered for forfeiture. There is no posthumous forfeiture of honours.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> [What do they know.com website](#), records from 2009, accessed March 2016.

<sup>19</sup> [PQ HL5633 \[on honours\]](#), 11 March 2015

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