



Size of the House of Lords: November 2020 Update

This briefing provides statistics on the size of the House of Lords and recent statements about reducing the size of the House.

On 20 November 2020, the size of the absolute membership was 820. However, excluding those currently ineligible to attend (eg those on leave of absence) the size of the actual membership was 799. Excluding bishops, the actual membership was made up of:

- Conservatives: 259 members
- Crossbench: 182
- Labour: 178
- Liberal Democrats: 88
- Other/non-affiliated: 66

Although the size of the House is still lower than it has been in recent years, it was an increase on the membership figures at the end of the 2017–19 session. Indeed, 43 life peers had joined the House so far in 2020, which was the largest number since 2015. However, 32 members had also left the House this year.

Concerns have been raised about the increasing size of the House of Lords, resulting in the Lord Speaker setting up a committee to look at the issue in December 2016. The committee, chaired by Lord Burns (Crossbench), published a report in October 2017 setting out recommendations for how the size of the House could be reduced to and maintained at a membership of 600. It called on the House and the Government to work together to achieve the reduction but did not propose any legislation. The report was supported by most speakers in a House debate on 19 December 2017.

Since then, the committee have published two follow-up reports, one in 2018 and one in 2019. These commended the work being done to reduce the size of the House of Lords and thanked the then prime minister, Theresa May, for her support for some of the proposals. For example, she indicated that she would continue to exercise ‘restraint’ on appointing new members. However, the Government has stated that it does not believe that an actual cap on the membership is appropriate.

Reacting to the announcement of 36 new life peers in July 2020, the Lord Speaker described it as a “lost opportunity” to reduce the size of the House and a “policy U-turn”. However, the Government has said that it still accepts the need to address the size of the House, but that the new appointments were necessary to refresh the membership.

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I. Introduction

I.1 Membership figures

There are two main ways to count the size of the House of Lords:

- the ‘absolute’ membership, which refers to all members that may, at a point, exercise their right to sit in the House; and
- the ‘actual’ membership, which refers to those currently eligible to attend (ie it excludes members who have taken leave of absence or who are currently disqualified from sitting).

There are five ways members can permanently leave the absolute membership of the House:¹

- death;
- resignation;
- non-attendance for an entire session (subject to certain exceptions);
- if convicted of a serious offence resulting in a custodial sentence of a year or more; and/or
- upon the House exercising its powers to expel a member for a breach of the code of conduct that arose or came to light after the passing of the House of Lords (Expulsion and Suspension) Act 2015.

As mentioned above, the actual membership of the House excludes members who have taken leave of absence or who are currently disqualified from sitting.² In most cases, members are disqualified from sitting due to holding a particular post (such as a senior judicial post).

Although these exclusions from the actual membership preclude a member from immediately participating in sittings of the House, they are (in theory) only temporary exclusions. For example, members on leave of absence may apply to return to the House following a three month notice period and those disqualified due to holding a particular office may be able to participate

¹ See the House of Lords Reform Act 2014 and the House of Lords (Expulsion and Suspension) Act 2015.

² See the current list of ineligible members: Parliament website, [‘Find members: currently not eligible’](#), accessed 20 November 2020.

in proceedings of the House once their disqualifying position has been relinquished.³

In terms of joining the House, there are four main avenues to becoming a member in the House of Lords:

- Through recommendation by the House of Lords Appointments Commission to sit on the crossbenches.⁴
- Prime Ministerial appointments (including non-party political appointments, resignation honours, dissolution honours, ministerial appointments and lists of new working peers).⁵
- Appointment to the House as an archbishop or bishop of the Church of England.⁶
- Election (through a by-election process) to replace an excepted hereditary peer who has left the House through either death, retirement or expulsion.⁷

However, the latter two have little practical effect on the size of the House, as all such arrivals are replacing a member who has left. For example, there are currently 26 seats available in the House for archbishops or bishops of the Church of England. These consist of five seats automatically granted to the archbishops of Canterbury and York and the bishops of London, Durham and Winchester.⁸ When a vacancy arises in one of the remaining 21 seats (eg through retirement or death) it was practice for the most senior bishop from outside the House to take the vacant seat (bishops are required to retire at 70). However, following the enactment of the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015, eligible women bishops are now given preference for these seats up until May 2025.

In addition, following the House of Lords Act 1999, 92 hereditary peers are also granted a seat in the House of Lords and sit by virtue of their hereditary

³ However, on 16 December 2015, the House agreed to a recommendation by the Procedure Committee Sub-committee on Leave of Absence that members should be encouraged to retire rather than go on leave of absence if they were unsure they would return: [HL Hansard, 16 December 2015, cols 2079–81](#). See also: House of Lords Procedure Committee, [Changes to the Leave of Absence Scheme, Ballot for Oral Question Slots During Recesses, Status of Interpreted or Translated Evidence to Select Committees](#), 30 November 2015, HL Paper 62 of session 2015–16, pp 4–5.

⁴ Although, in practice, new members recommended by the Appointments Commission then need to be put forward by the prime minister for appointment by the Queen. See: House of Lords Library, [House of Lords Appointments Commission](#), 9 May 2012.

⁵ House of Lords Library, [Life Peerages: Lords Appointments Since 1958](#), 3 November 2020.

⁶ House of Lords Library, [House of Lords: Lords Spiritual](#), 4 September 2017.

⁷ House of Lords Library, [Hereditary Peers in the House of Lords Since 1999](#), 27 March 2014.

⁸ House of Lords Library, [House of Lords: Lords Spiritual](#), 4 September 2017.

peerages.⁹ Two of these seats are for the holders of the offices of the Earl Marshal and the Lord Great Chamberlain. When one of the remaining 90 seats becomes available (through the death of an incumbent), the member is replaced following a by-election.

1.2 Average daily attendance

Another thing to consider when looking at size of the House is how many members attend sittings. For example, the then Clerk of the Parliaments David Beamish said in 2013 that the size of the House of Lords:

Can refer simply to the number of members eligible to participate in proceedings, or it can refer to those members who do in practice attend sittings. Measures to remove from membership those members who play no significant part will reduce the size of the House in the first sense but will have no impact on crowding in the Chamber, pressure on facilities or costs.¹⁰

Therefore, it is also worth considering the average daily attendance figures. As shown in the next section of this briefing, this figure demonstrates that around 60% of eligible members tend to attend each day.

2. Statistics on the size of the House

2.1 Total membership and average attendance

As at 20 November 2020, the absolute membership of the House of Lords was 820. This was made up of 593 men and 227 women.

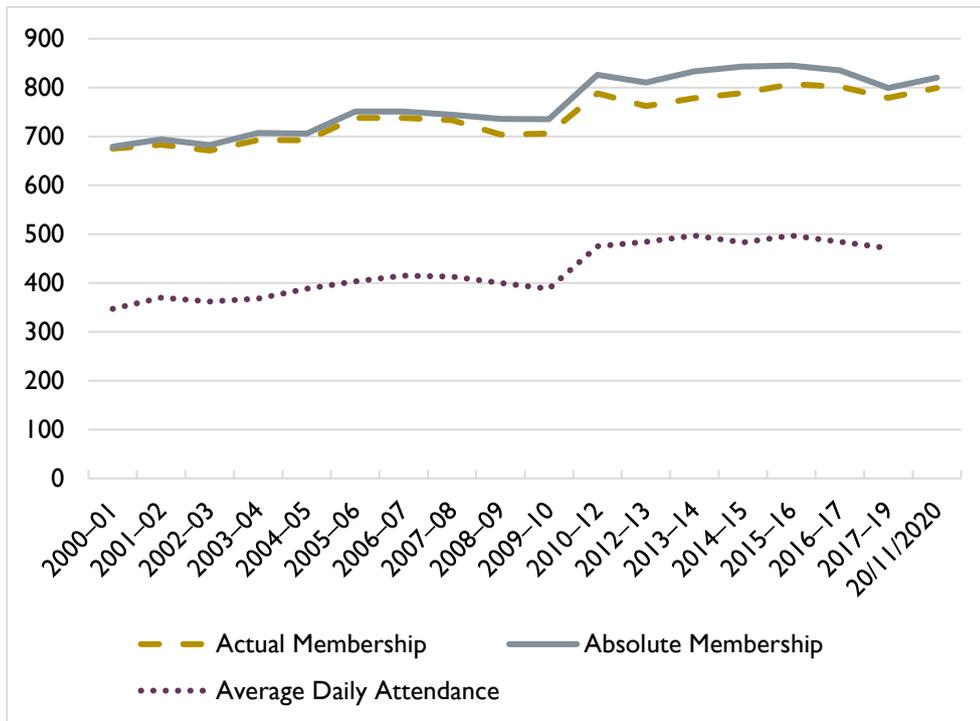
The actual (or eligible) membership was 799. Therefore, 21 members were not eligible to attend the House; 18 were on leave of absence and three were disqualified due to holding certain judicial offices.

The following graph shows changes in the size of the actual and absolute membership since the 2000–01 session.

⁹ House of Lords Library, [Hereditary Peers in the House of Lords Since 1999](#), 27 March 2014.

¹⁰ [Memorandum submitted by David Beamish, \[then\] Clerk of the Parliaments](#), to the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, June 2013, para 4.

Figure 1: Absolute and actual membership and average attendance by session since 2000–01¹¹



The graph shows there has been a general increase for both absolute and actual membership across the period, rising from around 700 members at the end of the 2001 session to around 800 today.

However, the current absolute membership figure is not the highest it has been across the period, with the peak recorded at the end of the 2015–16 session when it reached 845. It then reduced over the next couple of sessions, reaching 799 at the end of the 2017–19 session, before increasing again to the current total of 820.

Average daily attendance is also included on the graph. This increased across the period too, rising from an average of 350 members a day to over 450. In the 2000s, averagely 55% of members eligible to attend attended the House each day. In the 2010s, the average was 62%.

¹¹ Source: House of Lords Library. Note: Figures are from the end of each session, with the exception of the last figure, which is taken at 20 November 2020. The short 2019 session is not included.

The next graph shows absolute and actual membership going back the last 50 years:

Figure 2: Actual and absolute membership each session since 1970s¹²



The graph shows that the House grew to more than 1,300 members in the late 90s, before the House of Lords Act 1999 significantly cut the number of hereditary peers in the House. The graph also shows a general narrowing of those recorded as ineligible across the years (eg less members on leave of absence).

2.2 Members joining and leaving in recent years

So far in 2020, 43 members have joined the House of Lords. This includes ministerial appointments and the 36 new life peers announced by Prime Minister Boris Johnson on 31 July 2020 (although one of these, Ruth Davidson, has not yet joined the House).¹³

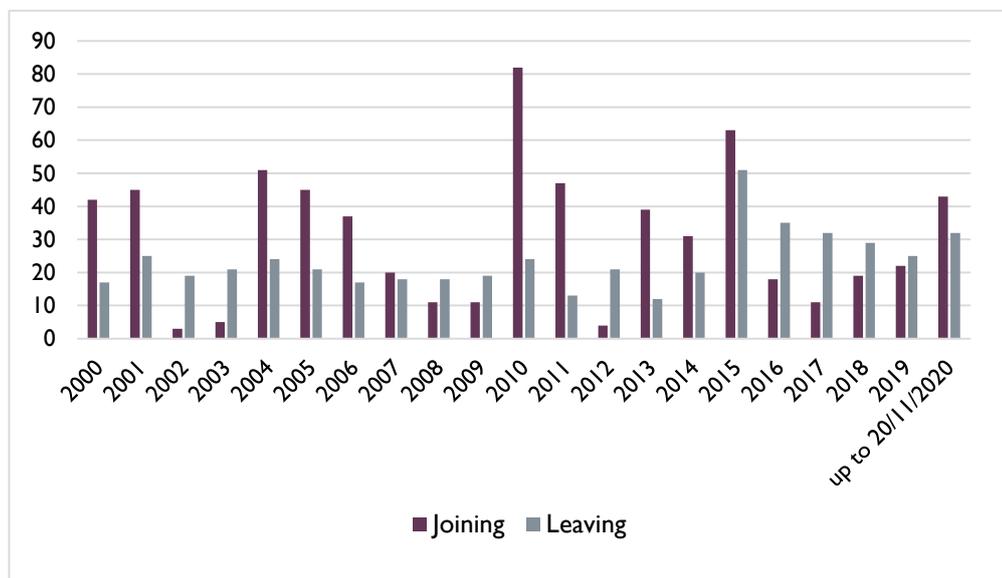
In addition, 32 members have left the House this year; 21 of which retired and 11 who died.

¹² Source: House of Lords Library.

¹³ Source: House of Lords Library. Figures exclude bishops.

The following graph shows the numbers joining and leaving each calendar year over the last two decades:

Figure 3: Members joining and leaving since 2000¹⁴



The graph shows that the year with the most members joining was 2010, when 82 members joined. This was the first year of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government. The current year, so far, has the 7th greatest number of new members across the two-decade period.

The graph shows a significant increase in those leaving in 2015, which was the first full year where members could retire under the provisions of the House of Lords Reform Act 2014. Since then, an average of 34 members have left the House annually. Before 2015, the average was 19 a year.

2.3 Party and group composition

Looking at the actual membership¹⁵, the current party and group breakdown on 20 November 2020 was as follows:

- Conservatives: 259 members (32% of the actual membership)
- Crossbench: 182 (23%)
- Labour: 178 (22%)
- Liberal Democrats: 88 (11%)
- Other/non-affiliated: 66 (8%)

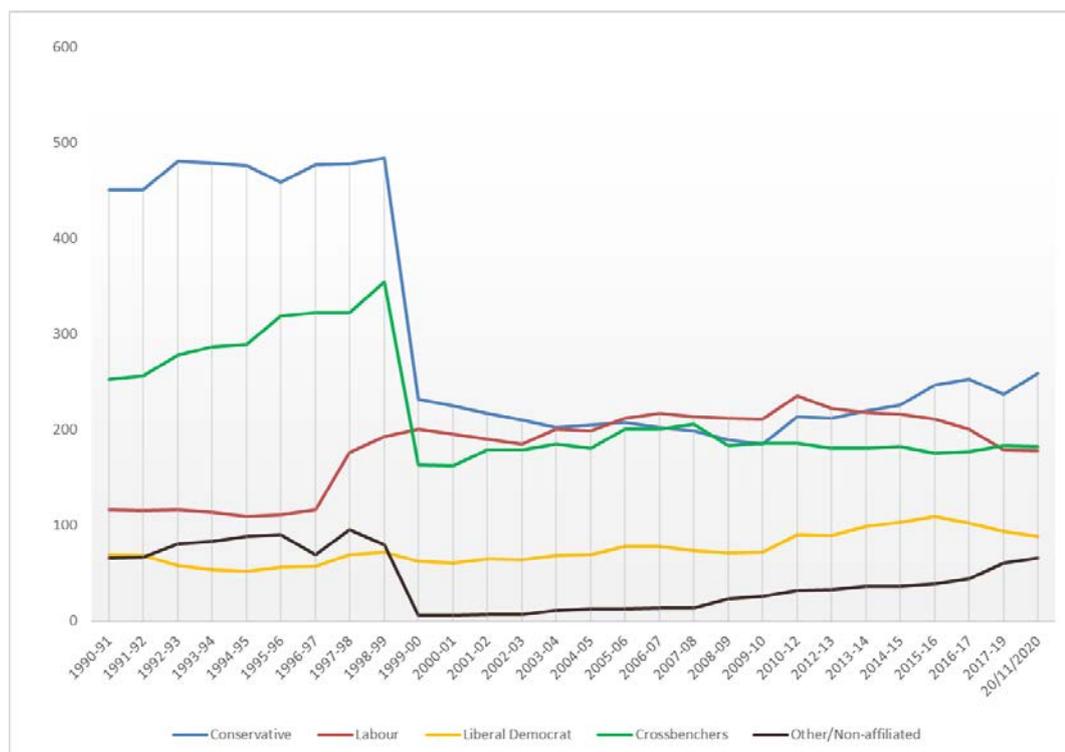
¹⁴ Source: House of Lords Library. Figures exclude bishops.

¹⁵ Actual membership is used for party and group composition because this is how the House reports the data at the end of each session. Therefore, focusing on these figures enables historic comparisons to be made.

The remaining membership was made up of the 26 bishops.

The following graph shows the changing nature of the actual membership since the beginning of the 1990s:

Figure 4: Changes in actual membership numbers, by party, since the end of the 1990–1991 session¹⁶



It shows that the Conservatives and the Crossbenchers were the dominant groups in the House in the 1990s, with respective memberships in the 400s and in the 300s. These groups were dramatically reduced when most hereditary peers were removed by the House of Lords Act 1999. Labour increased its membership numbers in the late 1990s and the 2000s and took over as the largest group in the 2005–06 session. The group peaked at the end of the 2010–12 session, when it reached 235. However, since then, Labour’s membership has reduced (down to 178 today) and the Conservative group has increased, growing from a low of 185 at the end of the 2009–10 session to 259 today.

2.4 Age and tenure of current membership

Apart from bishops, which have their own retirement rules, the House of Lords does not have a formal retirement age or any requirement for

¹⁶ Source: House of Lords Library. Figures are from the end of each session, with the exception of the last figure, which is taken at 20 November 2020. The short 2019 session is not included.

members to retire after serving a certain amount of time. However, fixed retirement based on age or tenure of membership is often raised as a possible method of controlling the size of the House. For example, these ideas were discussed by the Lord Speaker’s Committee on the size of the House, who ultimately recommended a maximum tenure of 15 years for new members (see section 3.2 of this briefing).¹⁷

As a guide, the following table shows the age and tenure breakdown of the current absolute membership (excluding bishops):

Figure 5: Age and tenure range of current membership¹⁸

Age range	Number of members		Tenure (years)
Under 50	33	114	0–4
50–59	98	192	5–9
60–69	209	130	10–14
70–79	294	108	15–19
80+	160	250	20+

3. Concerns about the size of the House

3.1 Reaction to new peerages announced in 2020

Reacting to the 36 new appointments announced by Boris Johnson on 31 July 2020, the Lord Speaker, Lord Fowler, said it represented a “lost opportunity” to reduce the size of the House of Lords. He also believed it signalled a shift in Government policy and went against the stated intent of the House:

[This] is a massive policy U-turn. It was only two years ago that the then Prime Minister, Mrs May, pledged herself to a policy of restraint in the number of new appointments. It was the first time that any prime minister had made such a pledge.

This followed a report by a special Lord Speaker’s committee chaired by Lord (Terry) Burns proposing that numbers should be reduced to 600. This was debated by the Lords itself with over 90 speakers, commanding overwhelming support. The big opportunity was for the present Government to take forward this movement for reform.¹⁹

¹⁷ Lord Speaker’s Committee on the Size of the House, [Report of the Lord Speaker’s Committee on the Size of the House](#), 31 October 2017.

¹⁸ Source: House of Lords Library.

¹⁹ UK Parliament website, [‘Lord Speaker statement on new appointments’](#), 31 July 2020.

Responding to this criticism, a Government spokesperson said that the Government accepted the size of the House of Lords still needed addressing.²⁰ The spokesperson stated that the new members were needed to refresh the House due to recent departures.

This point was reasserted by Lord True, Minister of State for the Cabinet Office, in response to an oral question tabled by Lord Grocott (Labour) about capping the size of the House of Lords on 16 September 2020.²¹ He also emphasised that the Government did not agree that there should be a specific cap on numbers:

The preceding prime minister did not accept the Burns committee's recommendation that the prime minister should commit to a specific cap on numbers, and that is the position of the Government.²²

3.2 Lord Speaker's Committee on the Size of the House

As mentioned above, in a debate on 19 December 2017, the majority of members speaking supported recommendations put forward by the Lord Speaker's Committee on the Size of the House (also referred to as the Burns Committee) to address the growing size of the House of Lords.

Establishment

The committee was established on 20 December 2016. It followed a number of debates within the House about its size, including one on 5 December 2016 where the House agreed the motion: "this House believes that its size should be reduced, and methods should be explored by which this could be achieved".²³

The committee was chaired by Lord Burns (Crossbench). The rest of the membership was: Lord Beith (Liberal Democrat), Baroness Browning (Conservative), Baroness Crawley (Labour), Baroness Taylor of Bolton (Labour) and Lord Wakeham (Conservative).

Report and recommendations

The committee's report was published on 31 October 2017.

It spoke of the concerns over the increasing size of the House, noting that, with the exception of the reduction in membership brought about by the

²⁰ *Guardian*, '[Boris Johnson "still committed to Lords reduction" despite 36 peerages](#)', 3 August 2020.

²¹ [HL Hansard, 16 September 2020, col 1265](#).

²² *ibid.*

²³ [HL Hansard, 5 December 2016, cols 500–92](#).

House of Lords Act 1999 (which removed a large proportion of the hereditary peers), the House had demonstrated a trend over time to increase in size.²⁴ The committee highlighted the appointment rate as one of the reasons for this increase, stressing that—in recent years—prime ministerial appointments to rebalance the House after general elections (particularly when there was a change in Government) was putting “upward pressure” on its size. For example, it stated:

The effect on the political balance of the House is only really visible over the last 18 years, as the Conservatives greatly outnumbered Labour before the House of Lords Act 1999. Appointments after Labour came to power in 1997 gradually rebalanced the House, but they did not become the largest party until 2006. The Conservatives regained that position in 2014.²⁵

The committee noted that the absolute membership on 1 October 2017 was 824, consisting of 800 peers and 24 bishops (two of the bishops’ places were vacant at that time).²⁶ It estimated that if appointments were to carry on at the rate demonstrated in recent years then membership could soon settle at a rate of around 1,000.²⁷ However, it recognised that it may increase further, principally due to the needs of future governments to continue to rebalance the House and due to increasing life expectancies. It stated “this would be unacceptable to members of the House and the general public alike, and result in an increasingly costly and inefficient chamber”.²⁸

To address this issue, the report recommended that:

- the House move towards a cap of 600 members (including 26 Bishops);²⁹
- until the House is reduced to that number, it operate a “two-out, one-in” principle, whereby one half of all departures (through retirement or death) would be reserved for reducing its size, and the other half of departures allocated to new appointments to the House;³⁰
- once the cap had been reached, it operate a “one-out, one-in” principle;³¹

²⁴ Lord Speaker’s Committee on the Size of the House, [Report of the Lord Speaker’s Committee on the Size of the House](#), 31 October 2017, p 8.

²⁵ *ibid*, p 9.

²⁶ The actual, or eligible, membership was 799.

²⁷ Lord Speaker’s Committee on the Size of the House, [Report of the Lord Speaker’s Committee on the Size of the House](#), 31 October 2017, p 9.

²⁸ *ibid*.

²⁹ *ibid*, p 2.

³⁰ *ibid*, p 1.

³¹ *ibid*, p 1.

- new appointments to the House be “distributed between the groups on a fair basis”, with the proportion of party appointments determined by the previous general election result and with Crossbench members ring-fenced at a minimum of 20 percent of the House or at their current proportion (this was calculated at around 23 percent at the time of the report’s publication (or 134 out of 574 members within the cap));³² and
- all new members sign an undertaking to serve only 15 years and then retire.³³

The committee stressed that it was calling on the parties and groups within the House to work together to achieve the recommendations, as it intended the changes to be brought about without legislation. Based on this principle, the committee did not make any recommendations related to the number of Bishops that could sit in the House (26) or the number of excepted hereditary peers (92).³⁴ However, regarding the latter, it did state that the House and the Government may wish to consider:

Whether it would be sustainable for hereditary by-elections to continue in a smaller House, as it would lead to hereditary members making up a greater proportion of the House and in particular of the Conservative and Crossbench groups.³⁵

The committee also left it up to the House and the parties to decide the rate and distribution of reduction to reach the cap of 600.³⁶ However, it did suggest possible targets, which it believed would enable the cap to be reached in around 11 years from the report’s publication.

In its conclusion, the report stated:

If our proposals are accepted, they will reduce the size of the House of Lords and maintain a cap of 600 members into the future. In doing so, they will provide sufficient turnover of members to refresh the House and rebalance it in line with general elections over time, while also guaranteeing a sizeable fixed proportion of independent Crossbench

³² Lord Speaker’s Committee on the Size of the House, [Report of the Lord Speaker’s Committee on the Size of the House](#), 31 October 2017, pp 21–2.

³³ *ibid*, p 2.

³⁴ *ibid*, p 2. It recognised that measures to alter the number of bishops or excepted hereditaries that could sit in the House may require legislation (see the following Lords Library briefings for further background: [House of Lords: Lords Spiritual](#), 4 September 2017; and [Hereditary Peers in the House of Lords Since 1999](#), 27 March 2014).

³⁵ Lord Speaker’s Committee on the Size of the House, [‘Reduce House of Lords to 600 Members. Says Committee’](#), 31 October 2017.

³⁶ Lord Speaker’s Committee on the Size of the House, [Report of the Lord Speaker’s Committee on the Size of the House](#), 31 October 2017, p 5.

peers. We hope that members will unite around our scheme and thereby secure a fair and streamlined House for as long as it remains an appointed body.³⁷

The report was welcomed by the Lord Speaker, who stated:

This is the House of Lords reforming itself. It is being done without the benefit of legislation and relies on the agreement of members of the House [...] This report presents the Lords with an important opportunity. A smaller, more effective House will be able to build public confidence and support for its crucial constitutional role in checking bills before they become law and in reviewing policy through their hard working select committees.³⁸

However, he stressed that the recommendations could only succeed if backed by a political agreement involving the main parties and with the support of the Prime Minister.

Follow-up reports

The committee has published two follow-up reports, one in October 2018 and one in July 2019, charting the progress made reducing the size of the House.³⁹

The reports reflected positively on the progress made to reduce the membership. They noted high levels of support within the House and compared the reduction in members with their suggested targets. The committee said the House was making substantial progress.

The reports also welcomed the support shown by then Prime Minister Theresa May, who had welcomed aspects of the committee's reports and had shown restraint in the number of appointments made during the period. The committee hoped Boris Johnson would support their proposals too, stating:

We also hope that the new prime minister will engage positively with our proposals and act fairly towards all parties, and we look forward to communicating with him in due course. A scheme which is non-statutory and based on co-operation can only succeed with the prime

³⁷ Lord Speaker's Committee on the Size of the House, [Report of the Lord Speaker's Committee on the Size of the House](#), 31 October 2017, p 29.

³⁸ Lord Speaker's Committee on the Size of the House, [Reduce House of Lords to 600 Members. Says Committee](#), 31 October 2017.

³⁹ Lord Speaker's Committee on the Size of the House, [Summary](#), accessed 23 November 2020.

minister's backing, which will in turn encourage parties and groups to continue making progress in meeting their departure benchmarks.

The House has already made substantial progress towards implementing our proposals, and if that progress continues then it will have achieved an historic reform through self-regulation. If progress stalls, however, then the problem of an excessively large House will persist indefinitely, given the remote prospect of any legislation to tackle it.⁴⁰

4. Read more

- House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, [A Smaller House of Lords: The Report of the Lord Speaker's Committee on the Size of the House](#), 19 November 2018, HC 662 of session 2017–19; and [Government response](#), 5 March 2019, HC 2005 of session 2017–19
- Debate on the Lord Speaker's Committee report: [HL Hansard, 19 December 2017, cols 1965–2001, 2011–58 and 2070–108](#).
- Constitution Unit at University College London, '[Full House: regulating the size of the House of Lords](#)', accessed 23 November 2020
- David Beamish (former Clerk of the Parliaments), '[Reducing the size of the House of Lords: two steps forward, two steps back](#)', Constitution Unit at University College London, 18 April 2019

⁴⁰ Lord Speaker's Committee on the Size of the House, [Third Report of the Lord Speaker's Committee on the Size of the House](#), 8 July 2019, p 1.