Chapter 12

Arm’s length bodies

Non-Ministerial Departments
A non-ministerial department is:

- A Government department headed by a senior civil servant instead of a minister (it often has a regulatory or inspection function, hence the need to be politically impartial and independent from ministers)
- Not directly accountable to a minister
- Has a sponsoring minister who is accountable to Parliament for its overall performance
- Receives funding from Parliament


Executive agencies were set up in 1988 under the Next Steps programme.

- Legally part of a Government department, but provide government services as an independent unit of the department with a clearly separate identity
- Routine operations are managed by civil servants, who are directly accountable to the minister
- Ministers set out the policy framework within which they must operate
- The minister is directly accountable to Parliament for the agency
- Funded by the relevant department

Examples: the DVLA (Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency), HM Prisons Service, Maritime and Coastguard Agency

Non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs)—often known as quangos (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations)—are the biggest group of ALBs. They are public bodies delivering government functions independently of ministerial control.

- Not Government departments or part of a Government department
- Not headed by a minister; a non-executive board is responsible for delivery
- The sponsoring minister sets a strategic policy framework for their operation (defining what they do) and is accountable to Parliament for the body’s overall performance
- The minister appoints the body’s board members
- Not staffed by civil servants

NDPBs fall into four categories:

- Executive (carry out various functions including administrative, regulatory and technical, e.g. Environment Agency, Health and Safety Executive, Parole Board, NHS England)
- Advisory (give independent specialist advice to Government e.g. Committee on Standards in Public Life, Law Commission)
- Tribunal (are part of the justice system and have jurisdiction over a specific area of law e.g. Traffic Commissioners, Investigatory Powers Tribunal)
- Independent monitoring boards (oversee prisons and immigration removal centres e.g. HM Inspectorate of Prisons)

**Public corporations** are market bodies (selling goods or services) that are controlled by central government but have day-to-day operational independence. The corporations themselves are not part of central Government.

Examples: the BBC, Civil Aviation Authority, Historic Royal Palaces