



Factsheet M1 Members Series

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House of Commons Information Office

You and Your MP

The House of Commons is made up of 646 Members of Parliament (MPs), each representing one constituency. This **Factsheet** gives an introduction to their work and the ways in which they might help you.

This factsheet is available on the internet at:
http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_publications_and_archives/factsheets.cfm

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Introduction

The House of Commons is made up of 646 Members of Parliament (MPs), each representing one constituency. This factsheet gives an introduction to their work and the ways in which they might help you.

Who is my MP?

You can find out who your MP is by asking in your local public reference library or at your local town hall. You can also telephone the House of Commons Information Office (020 7219 4272). If you have access to the Internet, and know your full postcode, you can find out who your MP is via the Find Your MP service at:

<http://findyourmp.parliament.uk/commons/>

Contacting your MP

The first thing to consider, when thinking about contacting your MP, is whether he or she is the right option. There are a variety of options to consider, some of which may be of more direct help than an MP. If your problem is with services provided by your local council, then one of your local councillors will often be of more direct help than a Member of Parliament. Your local library or town hall should be able to provide you with your councillor's name and contact information. The Find Your MP service also has an option to discover your other representatives. If your problem is of a more general nature or you are uncertain where to go for advice, then your nearest Citizens Advice Bureau will be able to guide you. Alternatively, your council may run its own general advice centre or be able to direct you towards an independent centre.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there are also devolved bodies which have direct legislative responsibilities for many issues. Members of Parliament while often willing to become involved in issues where local procedures have failed or have encountered seemingly intractable problems would prefer that the proper first steps are engaged before they take an interest.

If your issue does require the involvement of an MP then the best way to make contact is to write to him or her at:

[Name of Member]
House of Commons,
London
SW1A 0AA

You can check Member's titles by looking up your Member on the Alphabetical list of Members on the Parliament website. Some are members of the Privy Council and have the title Right Honourable (usually abbreviated to Rt Hon).

A letter to Keith Vaz MP would therefore be addressed to:
Rt Hon Keith Vaz MP

And the opening salutation would simply be:
Dear Mr Vaz

All MPs have Westminster offices and will make arrangements for their mail to be dealt with or redirected when they are away from London, so it is much better to write to them there than in their constituency office or at their home address. Writing a letter about a problem, rather than

telephoning, is a good idea as you can explain things clearly and your MP will have the written details of your case which he or she may find it useful to refer to later.

You can telephone your MP's office at the House of Commons by telephoning the switchboard (020-7219 3000) and asking to be connected to the appropriate MP's office. It is worth remembering that the Members' staff are likely to be very busy and may work in a large noisy office so it may not be easy for them to note down complicated and lengthy information. For this reason, it may be better to write. It is also sometimes possible to contact your MP by telephoning his or her local constituency office. Once again, your local library or town hall and, in cases of difficulty, the House of Commons Information Office, should be able to advise you of the constituency contact point.

The House of Commons does not have a general fax number, although some MPs will have their own fax machines. There is no central record of MPs fax numbers, so you must telephone your MP's office first if you wish to fax some information.

Many MPs can also be contacted by e-mail. You can contact an MP's office or the House of Commons Information Office to ascertain whether they have an e-mail address, or you can check the list of MPs on the Internet at the Parliamentary Web site:

<http://www.parliament.uk/directories/hciolists/alms.cfm>

The Find Your MP service (see above) also allows constituents to send e-mails to those MPs who have given e-mail addresses for use on the system (currently around 570).

Whichever method you choose, you should generally only contact your local MP as MPs will deal only with the problems of their own constituents and not with those of another MP's constituents. This is because the British parliamentary system is founded on the principle that one Member represents a single constituency, and that her or his relations with constituents are very much a preserve other Members should not interfere with.

Your MP

The size of constituencies varies according to a number of factors but on average a constituency will contain approximately 68,500 electors. Your MP gained the right to represent your constituency by receiving more votes than any of the other candidates at the last general election or by-election. Once elected, the job of an MP is to represent the people of his or her constituency (constituents) in Parliament, whether or not they voted for him or her. You only have one MP so even if you voted for one of the other candidates and you disagree with the views of your MP's party, your MP is still there to help you with all matters for which Parliament or central government is responsible.

Meeting your MP

When the House of Commons is sitting, you will be allowed access to the Central Lobby to see your MP. It is best to make an appointment before doing so however, as your MP might have other appointments or engagements elsewhere and not be available to see you.

The majority of MPs have times when they are available at different places within their constituency for constituents to meet and discuss problems with them. These sessions are often called surgeries and details are usually advertised in local papers and public libraries. Your MP's secretary or local party office will also be able to advise you when your MP will next be holding a surgery.

What can your MP do to help you?

Many people think that their MP is there to solve all their problems for them: this is not the case. MPs are there to help only with those matters for which Parliament or central government is responsible. As stated above, for many matters, the appropriate first step would be to contact your local councillor or representative in your devolved Assembly or Parliament.

In England, if your problem is not local in nature (such as council tax, or local social services, or day to day problems in schools) but instead concerns central government policies (such as the National Health Service, HM Revenue and Customs who collect the bulk of tax and pay child benefit and tax credits, and the Department of Work and Pensions who deal with issues such as benefits, pensions and national insurance) then you should contact your Member of Parliament.

In Scotland, there are a large number of areas which have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament by the *Scotland Act 1998* and Members of the Scottish Parliament have the responsibilities for legislating in those areas and who would be best placed to listen to problems and potentially offer solutions. Once again, local problems should be taken to local councillors but those relating to most health service and benefits issues should be taken to MSPs rather than MPs. The Scottish Parliament provides a useful summary of legislative matters that the Parliament covers on its website.¹

The Welsh Assembly does not yet have the ability to make Acts of Parliament like the Scottish Parliament but it does implement many of the Regulations and Orders that derive from Westminster based Acts of Parliament. For example, the introduction of the Smoking Regulations in Wales was the responsibility of the Welsh Assembly rather than the Westminster Parliament. Much of the detailed implementation of policy such as regulations and orders can and should be taken to Assembly Members rather than Members of Parliament. This means that an Act of Parliament can have a different effect in Wales to that in England. For example, the Assembly set its own rate for prescription charges in Wales different to the charges applying in England.

The *Government of Wales Act 2006* introduced the ability of the National Assembly for Wales to make its own legislation on devolved matters such as health, education, social services, local government. When this legislation is implemented there will be a new category of Welsh laws called Assembly Measures and Assembly Members will become responsible for laws in these areas rather than Members of Parliament.

In Northern Ireland, there is a similar set of issues devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly for which the Assembly will make legislation. For these issues the relevant Assembly Member would be the appropriate first step. A list of the issues addressed by the Assembly rather than the Westminster Parliament is available in Schedule 3 of the *Northern Ireland Act 1998*.²

Your MP is not there to help you in private disputes with neighbours, with an employer, with family matters or with companies who have sold you faulty goods; nor can they interfere with decisions made by courts.

Constituents often take a problem to their MP because they do not know who else could help them. MPs are very generous at giving help and advice and will often have a local councillor at their constituency surgeries to help those constituents whose problems are connected with the services

1 <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/vli/mspwork/whatisanmsp.htm#mspsdo>

2 <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1998/80047--p.htm#sch3>

provided by local authorities such as dustbins, housing repairs or public lavatories.

Your MP will try to be as helpful as he or she can but, since he or she has around 68,500 constituents to look after and his or her Parliamentary duties to attend to, this will place limits on the amount of time which can be spent in the constituency. It is then important that they spend their time dealing with problems that relate to them, rather than diverting queries that should have been taken elsewhere.

How does your MP deal with your problems?

Where your problem does require that you contact your MP, there is a number of methods available to try to resolve the matter:

- A letter from your MP to the relevant department or official will often provide a solution;
- Your MP may decide to take matters a stage further by writing to the Minister involved;
- Your MP may make an appointment to see the Minister personally.

Many constituents' problems can be solved in this way but not all problems, of course, have an easy solution. The Minister may not be able to give the answer that you wanted to hear but if the decision has been made in the right way, there may be little that can be done. If, on the other hand, there has been unnecessary delay, or if some essential procedure has been missed out, i.e. if there has been maladministration, your MP may be able to take your case to the Parliamentary Ombudsman (also called the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration). The Ombudsman is sometimes able to resolve such cases where there has been administrative incompetence but can only be approached via your MP, you cannot approach the Ombudsman directly. The Health Service Ombudsman can provide similar help where the problem involves the NHS. The two Ombudsman posts are currently both held by the same person and have a website at the following address:

<http://www.ombudsman.org.uk/>

There is also a Commissioner for Local Administration (Local Government Ombudsman) who deals with possible maladministration in local government matters. A complainant must give the council concerned an opportunity to deal with a complaint against it first. It is best to use the council's own complaints procedure, if it has one. If the complainant is not satisfied with the action the council takes, he or she can send a written complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman, or ask a councillor to do so on their behalf. More details are given on the website of the Local Government Ombudsman at:

<http://www.lgo.org.uk/>

Raising matters in the House

All of the methods discussed so far allow problems to be kept confidential. If your MP is not satisfied with the answers received, he or she may feel that there is something to be gained by making the matter public and may want to raise the issue in the House of Commons in front of the press and public. There are a number of occasions when your MP may have the chance to do this.

- Oral Questions - The most popular is for your MP to put the Minister on the spot by asking an oral question at Question Time one afternoon. Ministers answer questions at the despatch box on a rota basis and there is a limit to the number of questions which there will be time to ask, so this cannot necessarily be done on a given day. Similarly, your MP can table a written question to the appropriate Government department. The answers to these questions are then published in Hansard (see Factsheet P1).

- **Adjournment Debates** - Your MP may also try to raise your problem in the half-hour Adjournment Debate, which is usually the last business of the day, although again there will be competition amongst MPs for the right to raise matters on adjournment and your MP must be successful in a ballot or have his or her subject chosen by the Speaker.
- **Early Day Motions** - At other times, your MP may prefer to draw attention to the matter by what is called an Early Day Motion. Although EDMs are very rarely debated, your MP will have placed on record his or her opinion on a subject and is able to gauge the support of his or her fellow MPs (see Factsheet P3).
- **Private Members' Bill** - If your MP becomes aware that your problem is a common one then he or she may try to gain the opportunity to introduce a Private Member's Bill (see Factsheet L2). Only a very few such measures are successful (see Factsheet L3) but once again publicity is drawn to the matter and the Minister may be persuaded to make changes in the future.

These methods can all produce results and sometimes the publicity may be helpful in persuading a Minister to change his or her mind. Please note that the Code of Conduct for Ministers means that Ministers are not able to pursue these courses of action. Parliamentary Private Secretaries and opposition spokespeople may also be restricted by internal party rules.

Petitions

If you and other people feel strongly about a certain issue, you may decide to organise a petition to the House of Commons. Your petition can only be presented by an MP and must be arranged in a particular format (see **Factsheet P7**). You can obtain advice on this by writing to the:

Clerk of Public Petitions,
Journal Office,
House of Commons,
London
SW1A 0AA (see also **Factsheet P7**).

The Prime Minister's website also provides an opportunity to present an electronic petition. See

<http://petitions.pm.gov.uk>

Campaigns and lobbying

MPs are often contacted by constituents campaigning on behalf of a particular cause, perhaps representing an organised pressure group. It will be for your MP to decide whether to take any action. Anyone who is intending to organise a 'mass lobby' to the House of Commons must contact the Serjeant at Arms Department (020 7219 3030) well in advance.

The responsibilities of your MP

Your MP will generally do everything he or she can to help constituents but will not feel able to support every cause nor will he, or she, be able to get the desired solution to every individual problem. Members may not be willing to support one constituent if in doing so they will deprive another. At times a constituent's demands may conflict with party policy and your MP will have to decide where their first loyalty should lie. The Member may think that, in any case, a majority of constituents would support the party policy - after all that is likely to be one of the reasons why they elected him or her.

There is no statutory job description for MPs.³ The Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament, the latest version of which was agreed to by the House of Commons on 13 July 2005,⁴ is the nearest approximation. The purpose of the Code is "to assist Members in the discharge of their obligations to the House, their constituents and the public at large". You can view the Code on the Parliament website or purchase a hard copy from the Stationery Office.

Complaints against MPs

There is no formal procedure for complaining if you are unsatisfied with the service you have received from your Member of Parliament. If you are not satisfied with the treatment you have received you have three courses of action available to you.

First you can take your complaint to the local party association. Although there may be no immediate sanction they can take, the choice of who is selected to represent the constituency in future elections rests with them. There should be a contact number and address in your local telephone directory. Alternatively, you can write to the party's headquarters.

The other option is to write to the Chief Whip of the party to which your MP belongs. The address is:

[Name of Party]
Chief Whip's Office
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

That office will deal with the complaint from there.

The Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards,⁵ established in 1995, does not deal with a Member of Parliament's decision on how to handle a constituent's case or a Member's views or opinions. The remit of the Commissioner is mainly concerned with breaches of the Code of Conduct and the registration and declaration of financial interests and benefits.

Visiting the Palace of Westminster

Guided tours of the building take place during the Summer Recess; more details are given on the Parliament website.

http://www.parliament.uk/about/visiting/summer_opening.cfm

At other times, you must contact your MP to obtain a permit. Times and numbers are limited so, consequently, there is great demand for tours and you should contact your MP's office to make the necessary arrangements well in advance - two to three months ahead - and should be as flexible as possible in choice of date. Constituents are not admitted for tours of the building unless they have made a booking through their MP. Due to the limited availability of tours we are unable at present to

3 A generic job description was drawn up by the Senior Salaries Review Body ('Review of Parliamentary Pay and Allowances', Report No.38, 1996, Cm 3330-II, P.22)

4 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmcode.htm>

5 http://www.parliament.uk/about_commons/pdfs.cfm

offer tours to overseas visitors.

MPs have only two tickets approximately every ten days to give to constituents for the Strangers' Gallery, so demand is very heavy. Tickets from MPs are the only way to secure entry for such popular sessions as Question Time. Tickets are not always necessary if you can visit at an off peak time. Further information in the form of a leaflet regarding gallery visits is available on request from the House of Commons Information Office and on the Parliament Internet site.

Appendix – Contact details for other representative bodies

Scottish Parliament:

Tel 0131 348 5000

Web <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk>

National Assembly for Wales:

Tel 0845 010 5500

Web <http://www.wales.gov.uk>

Northern Ireland Assembly:

Tel 028 9052 1333

Web <http://www.ni-assembly.gov.uk>

London Assembly City Hall

The Queen's Walk

London SE1 2AA

tel: 020 7983 4000

Website: <http://www.london.gov.uk>

The European Parliament's United Kingdom Office has its headquarters in London and a smaller office in Edinburgh.

European Parliament

2 Queen Anne's Gate

London SW1H 9AA

Director: Dermot Scott

Tel: 020 7227 4300

Fax: 020 7227 4302

Fax: 020 7227 4301 (Library)

Fax: 020 7227 4327 (Press)

Email: epLondon@europarl.eu.int

Office in Scotland

The Tun

4 Jackson's Entry

Holyrood Road

Edinburgh EH8 8PJ

Head: John Edward

Tel : 0131 557 7866

Fax: 0131 557 4977

Email: epedinburgh@europarl.eu.int

Contact information

House of Commons Information Office
House of Commons
London SW1A 2TT
Phone 020 7219 4272
Fax 020 7219 5839
hcinfo@parliament.uk
www.parliament.uk

House of Lords Information Office
House of Lords
London SW1A 0PW
Phone 020 7219 3107
Fax 020 7219 0620
hinfo@parliament.uk

Education Service
Houses of Parliament
London SW1A 2TT
Phone 020 7219 4496
Fax 020 7219 0818
education@parliament.uk

Parliamentary Archives
Houses of Parliament
London SW1A 0PW
Phone 020 7219 3074
Fax 020 7219 2570
archives@parliament.uk

Parliamentary Bookshop
12 Bridge Street
Parliament Square
London SW1A 2JX
Phone 020 7219 3890
Fax 020 7219 3866
bookshop@parliament.uk

Factsheet M1 You and Your MP

It would help greatly to ensure that Factsheets fulfil their purpose if users would fill in and return this brief pre-addressed questionnaire, or email a response. Negative responses can be as useful as positive.

For your purposes, did you find this Factsheet

- | | | | | | |
|----------------|--------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Very useful | <input type="checkbox"/> | Fairly useful | <input type="checkbox"/> | Not much use | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Too long | <input type="checkbox"/> | The right length | <input type="checkbox"/> | Too short | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Clear | <input type="checkbox"/> | Not always clear | <input type="checkbox"/> | Rather unclear | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Any comments?

Please write to:
Head of Section
House of Commons Information Office
London SW1A 2TT

If you prefer, please email to:
hcinfo@parliament.uk

If you require a reply, please print your name and address below

Name

Address

