



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 659 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/factsheets>

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Introduction

The House of Commons is made up of 659 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 Constituency Locata service at:

<http://www.locata.co.uk/commons/>

Contacting your MP

The best way to contact your MP is to write to him or her at the House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. 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 here 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 try to fax some information.

Some 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 Constituency Locata 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 470).

Whichever method you choose, you should generally only contact your local MP as generally MPs will deal only with the problems of their own constituents and not with those of another MP's constituents.

Your MP

The size of constituencies varies according to a number of factors but on average a constituency will contain approximately 67,000 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. Generally Members will only deal with issues raised by their own constituents and not with issues raised by constituents of other Members. 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.

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. Problems often arise with work carried out by central government departments and your MP will be able to help you with such areas as:

- Tax problems involving the Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise Departments (but not the council tax which is paid to your local authority);
- Problems dealt with by the Department of Health such as hospitals and the National Health Service (but not problems with the social services department of your local authority);
- Problems dealt with by the Department for Work and Pensions such as benefits, pensions and national insurance;
- Problems dealt with by the Home Office such as immigration and matters such as school closures and grants which are dealt with by the Department for Education and Skills (but not day to day problems involving schools which are run by their governors and your local education authority).

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, for example, 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 provided by local authorities such as dustbins, housing repairs or public lavatories. If you feel that your problem really concerns the council rather than central government, then you should contact your local council or councillor. Your local library or town hall should be able to provide you with your councillor's name and contact information. 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.

Your MP will try to be as helpful as he or she can but, since he or she has around 67,000 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 involve central government, your MP has 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). She is sometimes able to resolve such cases where there has been administrative incompetence. The Ombudsman can only be approached via your MP, you cannot approach her 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*).

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 5555) 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.¹ The Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament, the latest version of which was agreed to by the House of Commons on 14 May 2002, 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 two 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 Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, 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. Their remit 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 will take place during the 2003 Summer Recess; more details are given on the Parliament website.

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 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.

¹ although 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)

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

Parliamentary Education Unit
House of Commons
London SW1A 2TT
Phone 020 7219 2105
Fax 020 7219 0818
edunit@parliament.uk

House of Lords Record Office
House of Lords
London SW1A 0PW
Phone 020 7219 3074
Fax 020 7219 2570
hlro@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

