

You and Your MP

*The House of Commons is made up of 650 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/>

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.

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

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 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.

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/mps-lords-and-offices/mps/>

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.

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.

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 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 are 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 and Health Service 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 Ombudsman has a website which can provide information about making a complaint:

<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.
- **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.
- **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. Only a very few such measures are successful 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.

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.

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 they 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. The Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament, the latest version of which was published on 23 June 2009, 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.

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

Chief Whip's Office
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

That office will deal with the complaint from there.

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. 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.