

No 41

YOU AND YOUR MP

The House of Commons is made up of 659 MPs (Members of Parliament), each representing one constituency. 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.

WHO IS MY MP?

Many people do not know the name of their constituency or which MP represents them. 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 Public Information Office (0171-219 4272) but you must be able to give your full address as constituency boundaries can run along the middle of a street, and towns and boroughs may consist of more than one constituency. The Public Information Office can also give advice on how to address MPs correctly.

HOW DO I CONTACT MY MP?

By letter 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.

By telephone You can telephone your MP's secretary at the House of Commons by telephoning the switchboard (0171-219 3000) and asking to be connected to the appropriate office. It is worth remembering that the secretary is likely to be very busy and may work in a large noisy office so it may not be easy for her 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 Public Information Office, should be able to advise you of the constituency contact point.

In person 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 in such places as 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.

By facsimile 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 secretary first if you wish to try to fax some information.

Whichever method you choose, it is important that you contact your own MP as there is an unwritten rule in Parliament that MPs deal only with the problems of their own constituents and not with those of another MP's constituents.

WHAT CAN YOUR MP DO TO HELP YOU?

Many people think that their MP is there to solve all their problems for them: unfortunately 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 such areas as the community charge/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; problems dealt with by the Department of Social Security such as benefits, pensions and national insurance (but not problems with the social services department of your local authority); 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 Science (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 other individuals or with companies who have sold you faulty goods, nor, for example, to 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 usually 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 district/borough/burgh or county/regional 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 town hall 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 will have an average of 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 which relate to them, rather than diverting queries which should have been taken elsewhere.

HOW DOES YOUR MP DEAL WITH 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. If not, your MP may decide to take matters a stage further by writing to the Minister involved, or even making 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 which 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 ie if there has been maladministration, your MP may be able to take your case to the Ombudsman (Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration). He is sometimes able to solve such cases where there has been administrative incompetence. The Ombudsman can only be approached via your MP, you cannot approach him directly. The Health Service Commissioner can provide similar help where the problem involves the NHS. There is also a Commissioner for Local Administration (Local Ombudsman) who deals with possible maladministration in local government matters. He should be approached through your local councillor.

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. 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. 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 subject chosen by the Speaker. At other times, your MP may prefer to draw attention to the matter by what is called an Early Day Motion. Although EDMs are not usually 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* No 30). These methods can all produce results and sometimes the publicity may be helpful in persuading a Minister to change his mind. If your MP becomes aware that your problem is a common one then he may try to gain the opportunity to introduce a Private Member's Bill (see *Factsheet* No 4). 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.

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. 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* No 32).

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 (0171-219 3060) well in advance.

THE VARIED 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 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.

TOURS OF THE PALACE OF WESTMINSTER

Only MPs can issue passes to allow constituents to tour the Palace of Westminster. 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. Foreign visitors should contact the Parliamentary Education Unit (0171-219 2375) instead.

VISITS TO THE STRANGERS' GALLERY OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

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 Public Information Office).

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revised July 1997
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July 1997 Ed 8 Pr 8 1000
ISSN 0144-4689

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Providing information on the work, history and membership of the House of Commons