

HOW TO LOBBY THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT



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CONTENTS

What is the European Parliament?	3
What Powers do they Have?	3
Members of The European Parliament (MEPs)	3
European Elections	4
The Voting Age for National Elections in the EU	4
How can I Influence my MEP?	5
Can I Influence Other MEPs?	5
How do I contact my MEP?	6

WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT?

The European Parliament is the only directly elected body of the European Union (EU) and together with the Council of Ministers; it forms the legislative (law making) branch of the EU. The European Parliament represents the people of the EU, in contrast to the Council of Ministers, which represents member governments.

The Parliament has two chambers - one in Brussels in Belgium, the other in Strasbourg in France. For three weeks of the month, the Parliament operates in Brussels, where most committee and political group meetings take place, then for one week it decamps to Strasbourg.

WHAT POWERS DO THEY HAVE?

- EU legislative power is equally distributed between Parliament and the Council of Ministers and between the two bodies laws are amended approved and rejected.
- The process of “co-decision” - by which a law is only passed when approved by both bodies - applies in areas including consumer protection, the single market, workers’ rights, asylum and immigration, the environment and animal welfare but not foreign policy or agriculture.
- The Parliament shares authority over the EU budget with the Council of Ministers and supervises other EU institutions, including the Commission. It vets new Commissioners, and can sack the Commission en masse.

MEMBERS OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT (MEPS)

The European Parliament is made up of 732 MEPs (78 from the UK) who are elected every five years by people in EU member states. For elections, each member nation has its own voting system.

The EU Parliament houses a broad number of political groupings, similar to the ones we have in the UK. Amongst the groupings there is the socialist group (including the Labour Party) and the Christian Democratic group (which includes the Conservatives). No single group runs Europe.

Between three and ten MEPs represent each region of England and the three nations of the UK, depending on respective population size. Each MEP represents the constituents of their whole region or nation. Your regional MEPs are there to represent your views and concerns, regardless of whether you voted for them.

EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

EU Parliamentary elections are held every five years and any UK citizen who is 18 or over can vote. Instead of selecting individual candidates, MEPs are elected based on votes per political party (except in Northern Ireland).

Before an election, each political party publishes a list of its candidates and the number of MEPs returned is dependant on the share of the vote it receives in each region. MEPs come from all walks of life. Lots come from a business or legal background, but many are trade unionists, farmers, journalists, teachers or even TV personalities.

THE VOTING AGE FOR NATIONAL ELECTIONS IN THE EU

The European Parliament is not responsible for determining the age at which citizens in the member states are eligible to vote in their respective national elections.

The voting age for national elections in the EU is 18 in all countries except for Austria (where the age was reduced to 16 in 2007) and Greece (where the age was reduced to 17 in 2016)

Other exceptions in the EU include:

- Slovenia: 16-year-olds may vote if they are in employment.
- Hungary: 16-year-olds may vote if they are married.
- Norway: 16-year-olds may vote in local elections in some municipalities.
- Malta: the minimum voting age for local elections is 16.
- Italy: only those over the age of 25 may vote in elections to the Senate.
- Scotland: 16-year-olds are allowed to vote in Scottish Parliamentary elections and local election but not in UK Parliament elections.

HOW CAN I INFLUENCE MY MEP?

MEPs spend one week per month in parliamentary sessions in Strasbourg, where they debate and vote on legislation, with the rest of their time divided between Brussels and respective constituencies. Constituency work is particularly important as it allows MEPs to represent local concerns at a European level.

Your local MEP will hold regular ‘surgeries’ (meetings with local people) in your area, and if you have any questions about European law or a problem involving another European country, your MEP should be your first point of contact.

You can also talk to your MEP about petitioning the European Parliament, to influence legislation or raise an issue which hasn’t yet been considered by the European Union. If you have a good case then it is possible your MEP could get an amendment tabled in the Parliament.

MEPs are members of political parties but they do not always support the view of their party. Therefore if they don’t have a strong personal view about an issue, your arguments could have a significant effect on how they vote. To find out about surgery times and dates you should contact your MEP’s constituency office (details on how to do this can be found at the bottom of this how to guide).

You can also write directly to your MEP, although they are not obliged by Parliamentary procedure to respond to every query. Despite this, MEP’s pay a great deal of attention to their postbag and email inbox, so just writing to express your concerns and encouraging others to do the same can have a massive effect.

CAN I INFLUENCE OTHER MEPS?

It is worth contacting other MEPs who may have a particular interest in an issue you are concerned with (particularly Members that sit on Committees). As every English region and nation within the UK has a number of MEPs, you have a large number that you can contact directly.

HOW DO I CONTACT MY MEP?

Go directly to www.writetothem.com to search for your MEPs contact details.

You can also contact MEPs through their constituency office. You may speak to an MEP directly but are more likely to get their researcher or secretary.

The UK European Parliament website also provides details of all MEPs names, addresses, titles and qualifications: www.europarl.org.uk/section/your-meps/your-mep