

What does an MP do?

There are 650 different ways of being an MP. It requires your presence in Parliament on many specified times including late nights, following the rules of conduct and Parliamentary process. It also affords each MP considerable scope to decide how to spend the many days and hours when the Parliamentary timetable does not dictate what is being done.

The main task of an MP is to scrutinise government actions, question Ministers, debate proposed new legislation and revisit old legislation that may be failing. This can be done in Parliament by a number of means, and outside through speeches, . blogs, media interviews and the rest. MPs lead a national debate to improve matters, and to expose things that need improving.

Some MPs follow the news and social media, intervening on whatever is topical. Some MPs specialise in particular subjects so their interventions come with more expertise and knowledge behind them. Some MPs allow the agenda to be driven by their party, others try to get changes to their party's stance on things. Some MPs campaign to get a change to a law or government policy. Many do this based on professional campaign lobby groups and organisations who supply them with research and back up. Some of us run campaigns for ourselves based on what our constituents are telling us and on our perceptions of what changes would improve public services or the economy.

The MP needs to get the right balance between listening and leading, between taking the views of the constituents to government to get explanation or change, and explaining the views of government or Opposition to constituents. The MP also needs to find a good work balance between time spent in the constituency meeting people, attending events and dealing with problems, and time spent in Westminster putting the case of constituents to government and participating in the debates and law making for the UK as a whole.

Some MPs try to become a sort of super Councillor locally. This is difficult to make work, as the proper Councillors have the powers to settle local budgets, make planning decisions and guide local services. The MP has no powers in any of these areas and may be resented by those who do have the powers if he or she grandstands too much on what they should be doing. The MP is ,however, often seen by many constituents as the Complaints department about any public service or planning failing they perceive, so each MP has to work out how to handle that perceived role and whether it is possible in particular cases to be a force for the good or for change in local matters. There is opportunity for joint working with local Councils as they often need government funding and approvals.

It does help to live in the local area so then your time spent shopping or being out and about is more time when you are available to constituents if they have something pressing they want to tell you. It also means they can see you are experiencing the same local problems they are if there are road works or flash floods or whatever nuisance comes to plague us.

A better Wokingham

On Friday evening Wokingham Conservatives held a thank you party for the volunteers who helped with the General election.

After I had paid tribute to those who went out in all weathers to deliver leaflets and talk to voters I reminded them of the four point plan for Wokingham I set out in my main election address. I suggested to the Councillors present that we draw on that when determining the local Manifesto for the Council elections this coming May.

Where improved and safer junctions and highways, better school buildings, more police and a wider range of social care requires more money I will continue to press for government increases. We are now seeing some of this extra money coming through, so I look forward to working with Councillors to see we get value for the extra money with visible improvements in local services and facilities.

The “job” of an MP

With the arrival of many new MPs at Westminster this week for their first year in office I will write a few pieces about the role of an MP, inviting your comments on what you want us to do.

Being an MP is not just a “job”. It is a way of life. My first advice to new colleagues is you are an MP 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Your time “working” may be closer to the standard 40 hour week of a “full time” employee, but for all 168 hours of the week you are an MP.

You are on call all the time in case some disaster strikes your constituency or our country. The constituency cases and emails come in at week-ends as well as during the week and sometimes need urgent replies.

You may be sitting at home listening to the news, but that may trigger some need to intervene following a news item. You may be in the local shops, but may then see something which needs following up for the sake of constituents.

I have included the 56 hours you are asleep or relaxing in bed though you would be wise not to take your MP work to bed with you. I do so because if you spend time in the wrong bed or share a bed with an inappropriate person you would soon find out that the media and public thought your bedtime a matter of public concern and debate.

Let us suppose you manage to carry out your duties in Parliament and answering emails, and dealing with constituency queries and cases in say 40-50 hours a week on average, you will have to accept that some weeks your working hours will be much longer. My second piece of advice is do not fight the need to be in Parliament when it is sitting and debating and voting on important matters. Surely that is what you have struggled to be able to do. Some MPs no sooner get elected than they are nagging the whips to allow them free time when Parliament is debating and deciding important issues. This leaves them tense and the party feeling a bit let down by them as the whips agonise over which request they can allow. There are days when we sit beyond 10pm and need to be there for a variety of good reasons. You also cannot do constituency correspondence on an iPad whilst taking a serious interest in a debate or Question time. If you are in the chamber it needs your attention.

Parliament meets to hold votes and make decisions about matters of interest to most people around 100 days a year. If those days coincide with a wedding anniversary, an important family birthday or a social event you just want to do you are likely to be disappointed. Explain in advance to friends and family that there are times when Parliament must come first. It is always possible to make up for that unfortunate truth by having a bigger and better celebration at the next available Friday or week-end when Parliament will not be wanting you in the evening or at all. Other Parliamentary days totalling around 70 offer debates which you may or may not wish to join, without votes you have to attend, so they offer more flexibility. For around 17 weeks a year or 85 week days Parliament is in recess, and there are 104 weekend days off. This allows considerable flexibility on how to organise events outside Westminster, meet the need to do things in the constituency and have time for yourself and your family. It is always a good idea to book out family time for non Parliamentary days well in advance and to stick to it in most cases.

Helping Australia

Many of us are distraught at the scenes nightly on tv from the Australian fires. I have contacted the government to ask if we are offering assistance.

We should not just assume because Australia is a relatively high income country she does not need help. Faced with the scale of these events she may appreciate additional ships and planes equipped for dealing with emergencies. We often help other countries facing natural disasters through our overseas aid department so we have some of the equipment needed.

Taking on a first employee

Since 2000 the UK has had quite a good rate of new business formation, in excess of the death rate for businesses save during the 2009-10 slump. London has led the way, with 1544 businesses per 10,000 residents, with Scotland and Northern Ireland at the bottom end of the table with 739 and 834 businesses per 10,000 respectively. Over the last 19 years the UK has added 2.4 m new businesses.

The bulk of these businesses are self employed people. Out of 5.9 million businesses, 4.5 million have no employees. 1.1 million businesses with employees have fewer than 9. Just 8000 businesses employ more than 250 people. The regions that have the highest number of businesses per 10,000 people also tend to be the ones with the highest incomes.

We need to ask what would it take to encourage more self employed people to take on their first employee? It does mark a large step up, with the employer having to accept a wide range of risks and responsibilities. We both need to create decent conditions for employment, and sensible conditions for employers so they find it worthwhile to take people on.

I would be interested in your thoughts on whether there are changes to be made to current rules to provide incentives to employers to create new jobs without damaging employee rights.