

Frequently asked questions on MEPs' salary and expenses

by Richard Corbett MEP

Aren't MEPs grossly overpaid?

A British MEP is paid exactly the same as a backbench MP at Westminster – not a penny more, not a penny less.

Do all MEPs get the same salary?

No. Until 2009, each MEP receives the same salary as a member of his or her own national parliament, which means there's a wide range of salaries. In 2007, Italian MEPs earned £92,661 per annum, nearly 15 times more than Bulgarian MEPs, who earned just £6400 per annum before tax.

This was only originally meant to be a stop-gap measure while a unified rate was agreed. By law, salaries should be harmonised so that all MEPs receive the same – after all, they all do the same job. But moving to a common salary means a big cut for some and a big increase for others. For many years, this tricky problem made it difficult to solve the problem.

However, a new system will come into force after the 2009 elections (see below).

What about expenses and the 'gravy train' image?

There's a perception – fuelled by the Eurosceptic press – that an MEP's expenses allowance is outrageously high. In fact, most expenses are comparable overall to those paid to Westminster MPs, and several are lower.

The detail is complicated because the categories and the methods of payment are slightly different, but basically:

- MPs are paid a lump sum of just under £24,006 for accommodation at seat of Parliament from which they can claim for specific items of house expenditure, regardless of the time they actually spent there. MEPs get £200 per day actually attended.
- Both MPs and MEPs get travel expenses once per week for journeys from constituencies to Parliament. Contrary to rumours, MEPs only get 'YY economy class' air fares paid, not first class.
- MPs receive an allowance for travel around their constituencies, but MEPs don't, despite the fact that their constituencies are much larger.
- MPs get first class tickets for spouse and children to Westminster up to thirty times per year. MEPs get no such allowance.

- MPs get two return tickets per year to any EU parliament or the European Parliament itself. MEPs get no such allowance.
- MPs get travel expenses around the UK on parliamentary business. MEPs have a similar allowance for travel around the EU, but this is limited to £3,500 per year, plus an extra allowance if they need to go home midweek.
- MPs and MEPs both get an office allowance. MEPs get a third more than MPs, but this has to cover postage and all equipment, whereas MPs also get unlimited free postage and free computers.
- MPs and MEPs both get a staff allowance. MEPs get 37% more than MPs, but this has to cover staff pensions, temporary replacements for illness, redundancy costs at end of mandate, staff travel, insurance, administration, and employer's liability. MPs get all that provided for free on top of their allowance.
- At the end of their mandates, MPs get four months of office allowances, while MEPs get three.

Aren't expenses paid on a 'no questions asked' basis?

No. For instance, travel expenses cannot be claimed without providing a ticket or boarding card. Similarly, staff contracts and evidence of tax and social security payments must be provided before the staff allowance can be claimed.

Are MEPs' accounts audited?

Yes. The European Parliament has a system of 'spot check auditing'. But, since Labour MEPs felt that this wasn't enough, all Labour MEPs have had their annual accounts independently certified by an external auditor, to ensure they have only been used for legitimate expenses with proper receipts.

Is the system likely to change in the future?

Yes. In June 2005, MEPs voted overwhelmingly for a new members' statute, designed to unify pay and expenses and to close some loopholes. The main changes in the planned new system will be:

- A uniform salary of €7000 per month. (When this was adopted it meant a pay cut for UK MEPs, most of whom still voted for it. Since then the exchange rate movement mean that, in terms of pounds, it has risen even if it is the same in euros – though this could swing back again)
- Flights to and from Parliament refunded on an actual-cost basis, rather than a flat 'economy rate' fare.
- Staff and office expenses remain similar to the UK House of Commons system.