

# THE BIG EUROPEAN CITIZENS' SURVIVAL GUIDE

*On Voting*



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## CHAPTER 1

### How to use this Guide

This guide is part of the **Big European Citizens' Guide: How to Succeed as a European citizen in modern Britain**, which follows EU citizens on their journey into Britain starting from Day One.

**This booklet on voting will tell you how the voting system works in Britain and how you can get involved politically as an EU citizen living in the UK.**

At the last census in **2011** there were 2.3m non-British EU citizens in the UK. A similar number of UK citizens live in other EU member states.

Many people in Europe are not aware that as citizens of a European Union member state we have a number of rights and entitlements.

These rights are really important when we move from one member state to another. While Britain remains part of the European Union, these rights will continue to be effective in the UK.

As an EU citizen living here, it is useful to be aware of what these rights are and how they can be used to protect your interests.

EU citizens make a considerable input to the economic, social and cultural life of Britain. But not everyone knows EU citizens living in Britain can also get involved politically.

### Your rights as an EU citizen

As well as fundamental rights such as protection under the law your rights and entitlements as a citizen of the European Union include:

- The right to live, work, study and retire in the UK
- The right to non-discrimination the grounds of nationality
- The right to vote in local, regional and European elections
- The right to stand as candidate in local, regional and European elections

This booklet will guide you through the various ways you can get involved politically like, how you register to vote, and who is here to represent you.

It is important that you know your rights and how to make them effective.

Remember the young men and women of the Euromaidan movement in Kiev. They know, as Churchill did in his time, how valuable the rights and liberties we have as citizens of a free and united Europe really are.

Good luck and every success with your new life in the UK



Euromaidan 2013



# CHAPTER 2

## Local elections

### LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

#### Local Government

Your local council is responsible for the services and facilities in your area. It gets money from local taxes, such as council tax and business rates, and also from the government. Unfortunately, there aren't endless amounts of cash available. Each council obtains a set amount each year. It then has to decide and plan how its money will be spent.

#### Local needs

Councils need to understand their local population. There wouldn't be much point in building a huge adventure playground in a quiet area where the

residents are mainly elderly people. It's important they get their decisions right; otherwise people will be dissatisfied at not getting the services they need.

#### What does the local Council do?

Who do you think makes sure that the rubbish is collected from outside your house? Who provides the local schools and nurseries? Who pays for the fire brigade? Who makes sure that there's police on the streets to help keep the area safe and free from crime? It's the local council that arranges all of these things.

Without it, there'd be no street lighting or cleaning. There'd be no council housing and social services couldn't support people and families in need. In Northern Ireland, housing, education and policing are not the responsibility of local councils but are provided by other government bodies.



Walsall Council Chamber



## Who chooses the Council?

Just like we have MPs representing us in Parliament, we have local councillors who represent us in the council. They also belong to political parties, so you quite often will hear of councils being referred to as Labour councils or Conservative councils.

## How is the Council elected?

It all starts with the local people. At the local election, they elect councillors. Councillors all belong to different political parties. The party with the most votes is the party in charge, so its main ideas and views will influence how the local area is run. The council meets and elects its leader and a Cabinet (just like national government). The Cabinet members and various committees are responsible for specific issues such as education, social services and health.

## Voter turnout

Voter turnout for local elections in some areas is as low as 20%. That means that just one-fifth of the people in some areas have had a say in who is in charge in the local area. The majority of people have, therefore, allowed a minority to decide who should run their local area. Yet the majority of people would not be slow to complain if local services started to break down<sup>1</sup>.



Don't join the ranks of the non-voters.  
Register to vote today.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.channel4learning.com/sites/lifestuff/content/whorules/local/whorules\\_lg\\_lg.html](http://www.channel4learning.com/sites/lifestuff/content/whorules/local/whorules_lg_lg.html)



# CHAPTER 3

## Who can represent you?

### Your MP

Each Member of Parliament in Britain is elected in his or her own ‘constituency’, that is to say the local area that they subsequently represent.

Unlike many other member states where politicians are elected on a proportional basis from party lists, British MPs are elected to represent one area, known as a (single-member) constituency and by an electoral system called ‘first-past-the-post’.

This means that the candidate who wins the highest number of votes is elected to Parliament to represent everyone from that constituency as their MP.

The political party with the highest number of MPs returned to parliament is invited to form a

government— usually one party will have a majority but between 2010 and 2015 Britain had a coalition government.

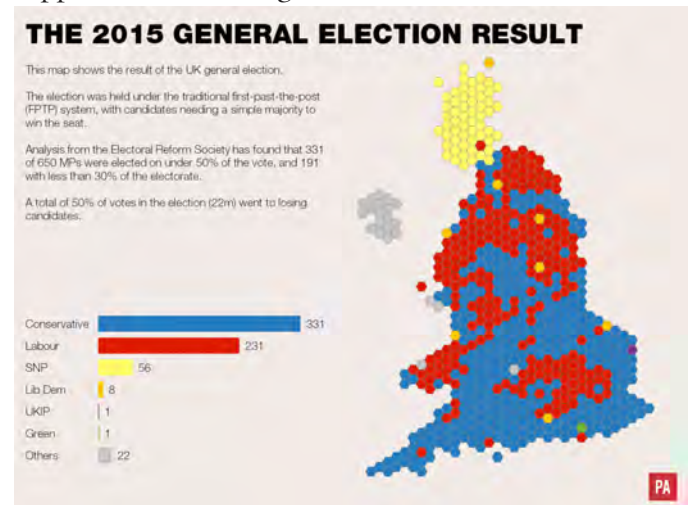
It is often said that British MPs have three voices they have to represent – that of their party, that of their constituency and that of their own conscience.

In Parliament MPs are expected to divide along party lines. Without party discipline in the Commons, it would be impossible to pass the winning party’s manifesto promises into law.

You can find out how your MP voted on various issues on the TheyWorkforYou website.

The men and women who make sure that MPs will be in the Commons for the vote and that they will vote the right way are called the ‘whips’.

Whips are not supposed to tell individual MPs which way to vote. However, they stand at the doors of the voting lobbies and so it is very difficult to avoid walking into the ‘Aye’ (yes) lobby when you are supposed to be voting ‘No’.



There are often occasions when MPs vote against (or ‘rebel’) against their own party for reasons of conscience. Serial rebels in the Labour Party have included the new leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and his Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell.

In the Conservative Party famous rebellions are usually on issues to do with British relations with the European Union.

Sometimes, in relation to issues such as gay marriage, abortion or assisted dying for example, MPs may be given what is called a ‘free vote’ and vote with their conscience.

In their constituencies MPs will rarely take a party line. Most MPs will pride themselves on their ability to be able to represent both the whole community, and any individual person within that community ‘without fear or favour’. That is also the expectation of their constituents (voters).

You can make an appointment to meet your MP at one of their regular advice sessions or ‘constituency surgeries’ as they are known which your MP will hold in your local area. The only criterion for being

able to make an appointment is that your address falls within the constituency that the MP represents.

To find out who your MP is, you can go to the parliamentary website, open the MPs, Lords & Offices tab and tap in your postcode where it says Find your MP.

Each MP will have a website with information about how to contact them as well as when and where constituency surgeries take place. In rural constituencies spread across a number of small towns and villages for example, the MP will move the surgery around the constituency on a regular basis.

Normally ‘surgeries’ are held in church halls, community centres or other such locations so that they are readily accessible to the local community. Sometimes the MP will hold the surgery in his or her constituency office.

Usually you will be able to make an appointment, but be ready to turn and wait in the queue, particularly if you have an urgent matter that needs attention.

It is important to remember that MPs do not sit in judgment over your case, they are there to represent you. You don’t have to convince your MP of the justice or injustice of your cause – you need to get straight to the point and tell your MP what your problem is. Your MP should then discuss with you how he/or she can help.

A great way to learn about how MPs work, and also to find out how to get experience working for an MP is through the Work4MP website.

In the end, the MP is a resource – for you and your community – and you can access this resource very easily, even as an EU citizen.



YOUR MP IS HERE TO HELP			
ISSUE/ PROBLEM	WHAT YOU NEED TO DO	WHAT YOUR MP WILL DO	LIKELY OUTCOME
Policy concern	Write a letter setting out your concern.	Forward your letter to the Government Minister responsible.	Your MP will receive a letter signed by the Minister responding to your concern and forward this to you.
Housing issue	Gather all the paper-work, and book an appointment to see your MP.	Write a letter to the Council asking them to expedite consideration of your application.	Your case file will come to the top of the pile and will usually be adjudicated more quickly.
Immigration issue		Refer the matter to your local council.	If the authorities know that an MP is looking over their shoulder they will not want to make a mistake.
Planning issue			However, your MP is not able to obtain anything to which you are not entitled by law.
Other case work	Email your MP, state what the problem is and why you would like the MP to do.	Either take immediate action or invite you	First week



## Political parties

The way to become a local, regional or national politician is not by ‘kissing babies’ but by ‘stuffing envelopes’.

That is a slight exaggeration but in British politics you are still expected to work your way up from the grassroots. Grassroots campaigning has a lot to do with mail-shots to your potential voters. Hence we have the expression ‘stuffing envelopes’.



Only half the fun if you use a machine

Nowadays of course much of this communication is done via social media and by email but the traditional canvassing of voting intentions by teams of volunteers going out on a Sunday morning still goes on.

When Labour won a landslide victory in 1997, the late Tony Banks, a veteran and very funny MP announced the end of canvassing – he said that as Labour had done better in the areas where it had not canvassed (this was true) canvassing should be abolished. It was not!

The purpose of canvassing is not to persuade people to vote for your party but to find out if they already intended to do so.

National elections can be decided on the narrowest of margins in so-called ‘marginal seats’ and so voter turn-out in these constituencies is vital. The way to

maximise voter turn-out is to target your known supporters which is why canvassing (or voter ID as it is sometimes called) is so important.

You don’t have to be a party member to campaign and help – non-party members who help are often referred to as ‘supporters’ which makes it sound as if the members don’t support the party. You won’t need to attend many local party meetings to realise that there is often a grain of truth in this.

If you want to put your name forward to stand for election, you will need at least two years membership.

Candidates are selected by their local parties, which may be organised not just at a constituency-wide level but also into local branches or council wards.

There are usually preliminary ‘short-listing’ meetings followed by the final ‘hustings’ when each candidate speaks and answers in questions and there is then a vote to decide who the candidate for the election should be.

Identity politics is still very strong in the UK and local issues tend to dominate. Expertise in a particular policy field or European experience is not usually considered to be an asset or even desirable.

What counts is the local identity and the ability to connect with and represent local people.

You are one of those people, whether you have the vote in parliamentary elections or not.



Crowded church halls at election time for the political ‘hustings’



As an EU citizen you can stand in the following elections:

- The London Mayor vote
- The London Assembly vote
- As a local Police Commissioner
- As a candidate in the European election right to petition the European Parliament

The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union contains many economic, social and cultural rights in addition to your rights to free movement and the civil and political rights listed below.

The Charter applies to the EU institutions and to the member states when they are applying EU law.

You can enforce these rights by applying to the European Ombudsman.

# CHAPTER 4

Other ways to be involved politically

As an EU citizen you can vote in the following elections:

- European Parliament elections
- Local council elections
- London Mayor and Assembly elections
- Scottish Parliament elections
- National Assembly for Wales elections
- Northern Ireland Assembly elections
- Police and Crime Commissioner elections



EU Charter of Fundamental Rights applies to implementation of EU legislation

Representing yourself may seem very challenging especially when you are living in another member state and without a support network.

However, these rights are an important protection and sometimes just a reference to them can help – no institution wants to run the risk of a legal challenge when there is a good prospect that they will lose and by doing so create a precedent.

You can also ask others to represent you, whether at the local, national or European level.

The most powerful advocate you have in British society is your Member of Parliament, your MP.

The structure of local and regional government in the UK is so complicated that your first step if you need assistance should normally be to go and see your MP (with the possible exception of Scotland).

If you do need to see a local councilor or a regional representative, then your MP will be very pleased to make the referral.

In Scotland, there is a Government and a Parliament rather than an Executive/Government and an Assembly (as in Northern Ireland and Wales). This reflects the different bodies of law that apply to the different parts of the UK and the different levels of autonomy that apply to each elected body.

As an EU citizen, you can vote for your MSP (Member of the Scottish Parliament), Welsh Assembly Member (MA) and Northern Ireland Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA).

London has an elected authority made up of two components, a directly elected Mayor and an Assembly made of a mixture of directly elected members and members elected by proportional

representation. The current Mayor of London is Sadiq Khan (Labour). His predecessor was Boris Johnson (Conservative).

A number of cities in the UK also have directly elected mayors, including Bristol, Leicester and Liverpool. A city can hold a referendum if it wants to create the position of directly elected mayor but many cities have either chosen not to do so or held referendums which returned a ‘no’ vote.

Finally, many areas of the UK also now elect a Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) to oversee local policing (the Mayor has responsibility in London, the Parliament in Scotland and the Assembly in Northern Ireland). As an EU citizen you do have a vote for your local Commissioner.

We complain all the time about our elected politicians in Britain but we seem more than content to leave decision-making to them!

Turn out in elections is falling and new initiatives to give the public more of a direct say in decision-making (such as the referendum on changing the voting system in the UK that took place in 2012) often fail due to lack of turn-out. One spectacular exception to this was the referendum in 2014 on Scottish independence, which very nearly led to the break-up of the United Kingdom (and, by the way, EU citizens had the vote).

Some say that Scotland will leave the United Kingdom if the UK pulls out of the EU following the Stay or Leave Referendum which will take place on the 23rd June 2016.

EU citizens living in the UK have not been granted the vote in this important referendum.



# CHAPTER 5

## The role of the community

### Trade unions

Politics is not the only way for you to be represented.

In the workplace you have the right to be represented by a trade union. The contacts of your trade union representative at work should be in the company handbook, intranet site or on the union noticeboard.

Joining a trade union will give you access to valuable support if anything happens at work that you are unhappy with or if you are involved in a grievance procedure.

Your trade union will also be involved in negotiating collective pay agreements and general terms and conditions of employment with the company where you work.

The membership fee for joining a union may be fixed or it may vary with the amount you are paid. Either way it is a worthwhile investment and insurance policy.

You can search a list of unions and their contact details put together by the Certification Officer, the independent organisation responsible for the legal regulation of unions. You can also use the Trades Union Congress (TUC) interactive tool to help you find a trade union in your workplace, or one which covers your type of job.

Once you have joined a trade union, your trade union rep will be able to explain more about your rights at work and the benefits that you receive, often including reductions on services such as legal fees and travel insurance. The TUC has produced a guide to your rights at work in the UK in 13 different languages.

See <https://www.tuc.org.uk/workingintheUK>

All being well, you will never need your trade union rep to represent you but trade union membership is a valuable insurance policy in case you ever do.

### Community and campaigning groups

If you are keen to campaign for issues or have your voice heard on the particular things that matter most to you then you may find that social movements, NGOs and pressure groups are a better avenue through which to channel your energies.

Well-known examples of movements and pressure groups in the UK include Amnesty International, 38 Degrees, Liberty and Greenpeace.

A lot of support and services in communities in the UK are provided by civil society groups (Charities and





# CHAPTER 6

## How to vote

Associations). Groups such as these are an important part of community life in your local area. Examples include Macmillian Cancer Support, Age Concern, Mencap, Mind (a mental health charity) the NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children), RSPCA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) and WWF (the UK arm of the World-Wide Fund for Nature).

There are also self-help and information groups Citizens Advice; Mumsnet, Gingerbread (for single parents) Alcoholics Anonymous.

There are also groups who have an input into how services are provided, parent and teachers' associations (Schools), patient forums (Health), residents' associations (Housing) and many other channels will exist for you to take part in community life and make sure that your voice is heard and represented.

You may take the opportunity to become involved in community life through your church, synagogue, mosque or other faith group.

Once you have established yourself in the UK, met your friends and neighbours, joined a trade union, voted for your local councilor, made your first complaint, written to your MP, told your first joke, you may decide that you like it in Britain and want to settle down here and stay on. One sign of this will be your engagement in community life and the opportunity to give something back to the community and the member state that you have made your home.

### Register on the electoral register

It will only take five minutes but it is very important that you register to vote. [www.registertovote.service.gov.uk](http://www.registertovote.service.gov.uk)

Use this online service to:

- register to vote
- update your name, address or other details on the electoral register

You need to be on the electoral register to vote in elections and referendums.

Registering takes around 5 minutes. You'll need your National Insurance Number (if you have one).



There is now a requirement for all members of a household to register for elections individually rather than via a form completed by the head of the household. Watch out for this, because you can be fined for not putting your name on the register.

There is no connection between the register and the tax authorities but the register can be accessed by credit checking agencies. Your credit reference score is likely to suffer if your name is not on the register.

When you do register to vote, make sure you ask for your name to be excluded from what is called the Open Register. That way your address cannot be accessed by individual and external organisations via the Internet although the paper register will always be open for inspection at the Electoral Registration.

There are six types of **elections in the United Kingdom**: United Kingdom general elections, elections to devolved parliaments and assemblies, elections to the European Parliament, local elections, mayoral elections and Police and Crime Commissioner elections. Elections are held on Election Day, which is conventionally a Thursday. Since the passing of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 for general elections, all six types of elections are held after fixed periods, though early elections

to parliament and the devolved assemblies and parliaments can occur in certain situations.

In 2016 there will be 6 Elections in the UK on 5th May in which UK resident EU nationals can vote:

- National Assembly for Wales
- Northern Ireland Assembly
- Scottish Parliament
- Police and Crime Commissioners
- Local government elections in England (Metropolitan)
- Mayor of London and London Assembly

Your vote can make all the difference but you cannot vote if you are not on the electoral register.

Do not join the ranks of the silent, the disenfranchised and the dispossessed.

Use your vote, it is your voice and your opportunity to change things for the better.

It is also your right in local, regional and European elections because you are an EU citizen.

FUTURE ELECTIONS IN WHICH UK RESIDENT EU NATIONALS CAN VOTE:		
2017	2018	2019
English local government (Regional-non metropolitan) Mayoral elections Scottish local government Welsh local government	English local government (Unitary authorities)	European Parliament Northern Ireland local government



# CHAPTER 7

## Useful contacts

### Institutions

European Commission: Your Europe, help and advice  
[europa.eu/youreurope](http://europa.eu/youreurope)

Representation of the European Commission  
in the UK  
[ec.europa.eu/unitedkingdom](http://ec.europa.eu/unitedkingdom)

European Ombudsman  
[www.ombudsman.europa.eu](http://www.ombudsman.europa.eu)

House of Commons - Parliament website  
[www.parliament.uk/business/commons](http://www.parliament.uk/business/commons)

House of Lords - Parliamentary website  
[www.parliament.uk/business/lords](http://www.parliament.uk/business/lords)

Local Government Association - Information office of  
local government in UK  
[www.local.gov.uk](http://www.local.gov.uk)

London Assembly  
[www.london.gov.uk/about-us/london-assembly](http://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/london-assembly)

London Mayor  
[www.londonelects.org.uk](http://www.londonelects.org.uk)

Mayor of London website  
[www.london.gov.uk](http://www.london.gov.uk)

Northern Ireland Assembly  
[www.niassembly.gov.uk](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk)

Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman  
[www.ombudsman.org.uk](http://www.ombudsman.org.uk)

Scottish Government  
[www.gov.scot](http://www.gov.scot)

Scottish Parliament  
[www.scottish.parliament.uk](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk)

Welsh Assembly  
[www.assembly.wales](http://www.assembly.wales)

Welsh Government  
[gov.wales](http://gov.wales)

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