



## **A GUIDE TO THE WORK OF EP COMMITTEES**

This guide is to give public policy advocates a brief overview of the way in which the EP Committees exercise their powers and responsibilities, highlighting the practical aspects of the Committees' work (such as procedures relating to meetings, reports and opinions, and the tabling of amendments).

### **I. GENERAL INFORMATION**

The main role of a parliamentary committee is to prepare the proceedings of the full Parliament meeting in plenary. It does this by preparing reports for consideration by Parliament; or by preparing opinions addressed to other committees which are themselves preparing reports. Reports may be either legislative or non-legislative, depending on the nature of the underlying document upon which the Parliament has been consulted (if any).

The Committee administration is dealt with by a secretariat of officials from the Secretariat of the European Parliament. These are non-political career civil servants. Their principal role is to assist the Committee Chair in organising the Committee's work. They also provide procedural advice to all Members, assistance in liaising with Commission and Council and drafting assistance to Members drawing up reports and opinions. The secretariat also prepares voting lists.

The rules governing the operation of the European Parliament, including its parliamentary committees, are laid down in the Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament. These Rules provide specific information on procedures relating to committee work.

Each political group has a secretariat responsible for assisting Members with their parliamentary work. Group secretariats include political advisors (sometimes called 'group agents', 'agents de groupes') responsible for the various policy areas covered by the parliamentary committees. Such political advisors follow the work of each committee, providing political briefing to Members on the various dossiers, advising on the political position to adopt, assisting in the preparation of reports and opinions and amendments to these, drawing-up voting lists and so on.

The political group coordinators are Members chosen to represent their groups at preparatory discussions on policy guidelines, on the strategy pursued by the parliamentary committee and on organising the practical side of the committee's work (assigning reports and opinions to the groups, deciding on hearings, preparing studies, making arrangements for committee delegations, etc.). The coordinators normally hold a short meeting (half an hour or so) in closed session in the course of the main committee meeting: full interpretation is provided. Interpretation is not available for coordinators' meetings held at other times. The secretariat

sends information to Members (draft reports, draft opinions, notes, and other communications) exclusively by e-mail.

## **II. COMMITTEE MEETINGS**

Committee meetings are normally held once a month in Brussels, during weeks specifically set aside for the purpose. Meetings are usually held in the afternoon from 3.00 p.m. to 6.30 p.m. and in the morning from 9.00 a.m. to 12.30 a.m. Meetings normally last for two successive half-days, although they may on occasion last longer than this. Meeting dates are scheduled in advance for the whole year. If necessary, extraordinary meetings are occasionally held in Strasbourg, during part-sessions, on Monday from 7.00 p.m. to 10.30 p.m. or on Thursday from 9.00 a.m. to 11.00 a.m.

As a general rule Committee meetings are open to the public (on rare occasions, the Committee may decide when adopting the agenda to deal with a certain item or items in camera). But only Members of the European Parliament - full Committee Members, substitutes, or Members of other parliamentary committees - may participate in the Committee's work and take the floor. Only full Members and substitutes may vote. And no more Members of any political group may take part in a vote than there are full Members of that group in the Committee. (In the absence of the full Member and the substitute, another Member of the political group may take part in the vote, although his or her name must be given to the Committee Chair before the voting session begins).

Simultaneous interpretation to and from as many as possible of the official EU languages is provided at all Committee meetings. The decisions about provision of interpretation at Committee meetings are not taken by the Committee secretariat, but by a separate unit which seeks to satisfy the needs of all the Committee, acting on the basis of the Code of Conduct on Multilingualism adopted by the Bureau of the Parliament on 17 November 2008.

This Code asks that, insofar as is possible, Members or their assistants should inform the secretariat in advance of their intention to attend meetings so that the unit responsible for planning interpretation can try to take account of their needs.

With the assistance of the secretariat, the Committee Chair draws up a draft agenda for each meeting. The draft agenda is sent to all full and substitute Members of the Committee, normally at least a week before the meeting date. The final version of the agenda is that adopted by the Committee at the beginning of the meeting.

At the beginning of each meeting, each Member receives, in his/her own language a dossier of meeting documents containing all the European Parliament documents (documents identified by a "PE" number, e.g. PE 123.456, in the bottom, right-hand corner) relevant to each item on the agenda.

These documents are also available on the Parliament's intranet 48 hours before the start of the meeting, so Members (and their assistants) are always able to read draft reports, opinions, etc. before they are discussed in Committee. After each meeting the secretariat drafts the minutes of Committee meetings. These are submitted to the Committee at a subsequent meeting for approval. The proceedings of the Committee are also recorded on tape, in the original language spoken by each speaker.

### III. REPORTS AND OPINIONS

When the Committee decides to draw up a report (or an opinion) - legislative, or own-initiative which also includes legislative initiatives, the coordinators then decide to which political group the report should be assigned, in accordance with the size of the groups, the other reports and opinions they are drawing-up, and the particular interests of individual Members. The group that is assigned the report nominates a rapporteur who is responsible for drafting the report on behalf of the Committee. Reports and opinions are normally considered in Committee on several occasions before adoption:

- initial exchange of views (normally without a text);
- presentation of draft report (or draft opinion) and setting of deadline for tabling amendments;
- vote on report (or opinion), amendments and any opinion(s) that may have been submitted by other committee(s).

Each of these stages normally takes place a month apart in order to take account of the time needed for translation.

#### 1. Reports

a) A **legislative report** is drawn-up in response to a legislative proposal from the European Commission. The Commission's proposal is forwarded to the President of Parliament who then allocates it to one lead committee and to other committees which may wish to draw-up an opinion for consideration by the committee responsible. Most legislative reports dealt with by the Committee are dealt with under the co-decision procedure.

A legislative report consists of:

- A draft legislative resolution (the precise wording of which will depend on the legislative procedure being followed).
- Any draft amendment(s) to the legislative proposal, together with short justifications, if necessary.
- An explanatory statement (this is optional and is not put to the vote: it is a statement by the rapporteur explaining his position).
- If the Committee proposes to change the budget proposed by the Commission, it must include a 'financial statement' indicating whether the new proposed budget is compatible with the Community's multi-annual budget framework agreement (the 'Multiannual Financial Framework').

The co-decision procedure is used for most legislative reports which come before the Committees. This entails up to three readings of the legislative proposal by both Parliament and the Council. Negotiations may be held with the Council to come to an agreement on the proposal before the completion of three readings. The Code of Conduct governing these negotiations requires the Committee to designate a negotiating team which must report back to the Committee at the end of each stage of negotiation .

The Assent procedure is used for International Agreements and entails a single reading and acceptance or rejection of the proposed Agreement.

In a limited number of cases, the consultation procedure, in which Parliament's opinion need only be taken into account by the Council, is used.

b) **Initiative reports** are drawn-up by the Committee at its request. They consist of a motion for a resolution and an (optional) explanatory statement: they fall into five categories.

- Strategic reports which react to non-legislative proposals; non legislative initiative reports which are no longer than four pages and annual activity and monitoring reports. A committee may not prepare more than six such reports in parallel. In addition a committee may prepare legislative initiative reports and no more than one implementation report (on the transposition of EU law into national law) per annum.

Legislative and non-legislative initiative reports are approved by the Conference of Presidents on the basis of a formal, comprehensive request. Strategic reports are approved by the Conference of Committee Chairs and other initiative reports receive automatic authorisation once notified to it.

## 2. Opinions

Opinions are addressed by one committee to another and embody the views of the opinion-giving committee on a matter being considered by the lead committee. When he decides which committee is to be the lead committee to draw up a report on a Commission proposal (or any other document), the President of Parliament may also ask one or more other committees to give their opinion. Where they have not already been asked to give an opinion, committees may seek permission from the Conference of Presidents to do so.

Opinions consist of draft amendments to the text referred to the Committee in the case of legislative texts; or of suggestions (conclusions) for parts of the motion for a resolution to be submitted by the committee responsible in the case of non-legislative texts. These draft amendments or suggested paragraphs for motions for resolutions are then put to the vote by the lead committee along with its own amendments.

If an issue falls, in more or less equal measure, within the area of responsibility of two committees, or if various aspects of the issue fall within the area of responsibility of two separate committees, the so-called Procedure with associated committees may be used .

If the amendments within the area of joint competence proposed by an associated committee are rejected by the committee responsible, the former may submit those amendments to Parliament.

The Member appointed to draw-up an opinion on behalf of the opinion-giving committee is called the **draftsperson** (in French, *rapporteur pour avis*). No draftsperson for opinion may be appointed until the rapporteur has been appointed by the lead committee. In many committees, a discussion takes place normally only when the draftsperson has prepared his or her draft opinion: a deadline for amendments is set at the end of the discussion and the draft opinion as amended is adopted at the next Committee meeting.

Special mention should be made of the budget opinion, since this is rather different from other opinions. Each year, the Committee draws up an opinion (for the Committee on Budgets, BUDG) on the Commission budget for the following year. The opinion consists of:

- a normal opinion inviting the lead committee to incorporate one or more paragraphs in its motion for a resolution;
- a separate set of amendments to individual budget lines in the Draft Budget (i.e. the Council's first reading in mid-July of the budgetary procedure). This is done through a dedicated system for budget amendments called SEI-AMD.

The budgetary procedure is, inevitably, rather complicated and has a vocabulary of technical terms which may at first sight appear intimidating. A clear, short and remarkably comprehensive guide to the budget and the budgetary procedure is available (in all official languages) on the homepage of the Committee on Budgets.

In order to facilitate strategic planning the Committee nominates a budget rapporteur at the beginning of the year, as at the end of the preceding year, who liaises with the budget rapporteurs of other specialised committees to help prepare the Parliament's Annual Policy Strategy.

### **3. General points**

There are strict limits on the lengths of draft reports and opinions which are to be translated. There are also strict deadlines for the submission of documents for translation. The secretariat must send documents to translation at least 12 working days (remember: Friday is counted as a half day) before the Committee meeting at which they will be discussed: if documents are sent to translation later, translations will not be available for the relevant Committee meeting.

## **IV. AMENDMENTS**

After the draft report or opinion has been presented to the Committee, a deadline for tabling amendments (to the draft) will be announced by the Committee Chair. The deadline is set in order that amendments are translated in time for the meeting at which they will be considered: amendments submitted after the deadline will not be accepted. Amendment forms are available in electronic format. Generally speaking, the format of amendments depends on the nature of the text being amended.

1. Amendments to legislative texts (in reports or opinions) must always be to the original legislative text (and not, for example, to amendments tabled by the rapporteur). They are presented in the form of two columns. The relevant part of the text on which the Parliament is being consulted (i.e. usually the Commission proposal or the Common Position) appears in the left-hand column. The proposed amendment to that text appears in the right-hand column. Any changes proposed in the amendment, compared with the original text, must be indicated in bold italics.

- Additions are indicated in bold italics in text in the right-hand column.
- Deletions are indicated in bold italics in the legislative text on the left (and of course do not appear at all in the amendment on the right).
- If a whole section of the legislative text is to be removed, then it is shown (in bold italics) on the left and on the right the word '(deleted)' should appear in bold italics.
- If a new section is to be added, then nothing appears on the left and the proposed new text section appears (in bold italics) on the right.

2. In the case of amendments to non-legislative reports (or opinions), the text that may be amended is the rapporteur's motion for a resolution or the draftsman's draft opinion. Amendments are presented in two columns, as with legislative reports:

- Additions are indicated in bold italics.
- A completely new paragraph is to be marked '(new)' in bold italics.
- If a whole paragraph is deleted, then it is shown (in bold italics) on the left and, on the right, the word '(deleted)' should appear in bold italics.

Finally, please note the following general rules:

- Amendments cannot be tabled to explanatory statements (as these are not part of the resolution that will be adopted by Parliament in plenary) nor to the Financial Statement (Fiche Financière) which accompanies legislative proposals from the Commission.
- Amendments must state clearly where they fit into a draft text (this is particularly important in the case of 'new' text, such as proposed new paragraphs for motions for resolutions).
- Amendments must be sent to the secretariat by e-mail. They must be signed by the Member(s) tabling them and the signed copy must be sent to the secretariat by fax or internal mail.

## **V. VOTES**

The order in which the business on the draft agenda will be treated is decided by the Committee as a whole at the beginning of the meeting. But voting on draft reports and opinions usually takes place at the beginning of the morning session of a two-day meeting.

The Committee's vote is valid when one quarter of its Members is present. Voting is by show of hands, unless a quarter of the Committee's Members request a vote by roll call.

## **VI. COMITOLGY**

Apart from legislative and non-legislative reports and opinions, the Committee also deals with implementing measures from the European Commission. Because over the years more and more complex European legislation has been adopted, a tendency has developed to shift part of the provisions to annexes or implementing measures. Adaptation of annexes or other implementing measures are decided by committees of experts of Member States chaired by the European Commission.

Several procedures for adoption in such committees exist, together referred to as 'comitology'. When the original file was dealt with in codecision between Council and Parliament, then Parliament shall not only be informed, but can have the right of veto over implementing measures (this is called the 'RPS procedure', an acronym for 'Regulatory Procedure with Scrutiny').

Parliament can express an objection to such a measure within a time limit of at maximum 3 months. This is done by means of a Resolution that shall first be voted in the parliamentary committee and then in the plenary. Implementing measures under comitology can concern very practical issues of importance to daily life of citizens, for example the use of children-seatbelts in airplanes, the use of body-scanners for security checks on airports or the labelling of TV-equipment.

## **VII. STUDIES**

The Committee is able to ask the relevant Policy Department (i.e. research unit) within the Parliament Secretariat General to draw up short reports (background and briefing notes) on specific issues to support their work on reports and opinions. But it can also ask for external studies to be commissioned, subject to the rules on the awarding of public contracts.

Decisions on such studies are taken in Committee at the proposal of the coordinators. They are normally set out in an annual programme.

## **VIII. HEARINGS**

Each year, the Committee usually holds three or four hearings of experts on subjects for which it is responsible. Sometimes, the proposal to organise a hearing comes from the rapporteur for a particular subject (e.g. the Trans-European Network - Transport), who may propose a list of people to be invited. But any Member may (through his coordinator) propose a subject for a hearing. The Committee attempts to ensure that the experts invited represent all sides of the discussion on an issue (government, industry, professional associations, non-governmental associations, academics, etc.).

Each year, the travel expenses (economy air fare or first-class train fare) of up to 16 expert witnesses invited by the Committee to speak at a public hearing may be paid. An annual programme of hearings is usually drawn-up by the Committee in the autumn. For practical reasons, it is a good idea to try to plan hearings at least three months in advance.

## **IX. HEARINGS TO APPROVE COMMISSIONERS**

When a new Commission is proposed the Commissioner Designate is invited to appear before the Committee in a public hearing. Before the hearing she or he receives and replies in writing to five substantive written questions from the Committee. The Commissioner Designate will make a statement at the hearing and answer questions. The coordinators and the Bureau meet immediately thereafter and determine whether the Commissioner Designate is qualified for the duties concerned. It gives its opinion.

## **X. DELEGATIONS**

Each year, Committees send small delegations on fact-finding missions to locations outside its three normal places of work (but mostly within the European Union). Such delegations may, for example, visit the capital of the relevant Member State to exchange views with Members of the incoming Council Presidency; or they might visit a major facility, etc. According to the current rules, Committees may send up to half its Members or at least 25 Members on delegations each year (no more than 12 per delegation). The length of the delegation - including travel from and back to Brussels - may not exceed three days.