

~ Participating in European decision making ~

Wish you were here?

Old and new Members of the Youth Parliament from the South West were the first to lead the UK Youth Parliament to Europe. On Sunday 13th July 2008 different groups from the South West hopped on trains to meet at London's Paddington Station. 30 minutes later it was a case of being vacuum packed on the tube to get to St. Pancras Station and wait for the train to Brussels Midi to start boarding.

It took approximately 2 hours to get to Brussels Midi, and from then on it was going to be a test of people's French skills (that's right, the local languages of Brussels are French and Flemish). Having walked the completely opposite way to the youth hostel were supposed to be staying at, it was time to call in for some directions.



After a meal and a little time to recover from the extremely long journey from the South West, we then had a night time walk, which was pure luck that we didn't get lost! Then it was straight to bed for some people, however, the more adventurous among us decided to stay up for a while in the disco downstairs in the youth hostel!!

Monday, was the main day of the trip. We had a 9am start with a presentation about the South West UK Brussels Office, which was extremely interesting. Did You Know that the South West economy is worth 80 Billion £'s and our economy is the 2nd fastest growing economy in the UK!!

We then had to rush over to the European Parliament to listen to the background of the European Parliament and for us to understand the different procedures, how MEPs are elected and their term of office.

We met 3 MEPs (Glyn Ford, Graham Watson and Marianne Mikko). They explained a little bit about what they do, and then we had the chance to grill them on our favourite topics. However, we also promoted the work of the UK Youth Parliament and explained how it works and what we do.

After this we had some free time to shop and have lunch. Many people had gotten to grips with at least some French, but I still got someone else to order my lunch! We met back outside the European Parliament and this time sat in on three different committee meetings: **Committee on Culture and Education; Committee on Foreign Affairs; Committee on International Trade.**

It was exceptionally interesting to see how these meetings ran on a European level and to see the use of technology overcome the barriers of language. You had to put a head-set on to listen to the people speaking. Around the room, there were little booths with interpreters sat inside, interpreting what the speaker was saying. You simply needed to turn a knob on your head-set to the corresponding language!!





After having some more free time to wander around the gift shop and have more group photos taken, we needed to almost fly back to the youth hostel and walk to our pre-booked restaurant for our 'night on the town'. After this, we had some more time to go and buy some famous *Belgian Chocolate*. However, two of our party were talked into buying an 'I Love Brussels' T-shirt!

With such an amazingly fun and informative trip, the same young people decided to leave Brussels with a big finish, by hitting the disco again and dancing until midnight.

Up and packed, it was time to make our way back to Brussels Midi and wait for the Eurostar to begin boarding. We all started to get rid of the last of our Euros with people buying ice-cream and Subway sandwiches.

Once we were back at London St.Pancras we crammed back on the tube to London Paddington, where we said our goodbyes to the others who were taking a different train & thanked our youth workers for a truly incredible experience.

One small step for the South West, one giant leap for European participation!



By Ben Salisbury,

Ex- Member of Youth Parliament and

Deputy Youth Representative to the South West Regional Assembly

Participating in European decision making - the practicalities (the bit for youth workers!)

Itinerary

We travelled out to Brussels on a Sunday to take advantage of cheap rail fares! We spent all day Monday at the European Parliament and travelled home on Tuesday.

Group size

19 young people (aged 15 – 17) attended the trip supported by 5 youth workers and a volunteer staff member. All the youth services in the South West collaborated together to allow their young people to attend the trip independently and in most cases be supported by youth workers from another youth service. The parental consent form we used is available on request.

Funding

The group visit was funded and arranged through the office of Glyn Ford MEP. Each MEP has a sponsored visit allowance which entitles them to sponsor 100 individuals a year. It is up to the individual MEPs who they decide to give sponsorship to, eg educational visits as in this case. The funding is obviously for people from within each MEPs own constituency, but many MEPs collaborate on group visits of this type. Travel costs are calculated from your UK point of departure, which in our case was Gloucester (Mr Ford's constituency), which worked out at 130 Euros per person. On top of that we had a 35 Euro allowance for subsistence. It is a flat rate irrespective of the length of your stay.

All costs for the trip were paid in advance by the Regional Youth Work Unit who host the UK Youth Parliament regional co-ordinator. Our payment was collected by the MEPs office who arranged a money transfer back to the Youth Work Unit. Cash in **Euros** can be collected on the day on production of all your receipts – funnily enough we didn't fancy this option!

The 3 day trip worked out at around £175 per person (based on July 08 Euro rates). Each youth service was asked to contribute £55 per young person attending and arrange travel insurance for their young person. Please note that for educational visits and tours the European Parliament insist that participants must be over 14 years old and the group contains a minimum of 20 people.

Accommodation

We stayed at the Brussels Breugel Youth Hostel (www.youthhostels.be) at their group rate of 18.50 Euros per person per night which included breakfast and bed linen (so no sleeping bags needed!). The hostel is ideally located to walk to the Grand Place in Belgium for sightseeing. It's a 20 minute walk to Brussels Midi (Eurostar terminal) or a 10 minute walk (when you have the correct directions!) from the Gare Central. 2,3,4,&5 bed rooms are available which are individually locked using a key card. Many rooms had their own shower, with male & female toilet facilities and extra showers on each floor. The hostel didn't charge us for any unused beds in the rooms or fill these with other guests! Dinner can be provided which is simple, but good value and they can also provide a packed lunch (useful for the journey home). The hostel does have a bar, but staff did ask us on check-in about whether our group should be served alcohol. Thankfully the staff speak very good English! The risk assessment is available.

European Parliament

The metro stop for the European Parliament buildings (Schuman) is just 4 stops away from Gare Central with no changes. Group discounts are available on the metro. Tours and attendance at committee meetings need to be booked in advance via your MEP and committee meetings are not everyday.

There is a nice park outside where you can eat a packed lunch, or, just a 10 minute walk away is a small square with restaurants, coffee shops and a take-away serving the best frites in Brussels!

Language

English is widely spoken in Brussels and Parliament tours can be booked in English. However, some knowledge of French is very useful for getting food and directions, navigating the metro and buying tickets!

Eurostar

When booked well in advance the Eurostar offer group and youth tickets (up to 25 yrs old) at an average cost of £50 per person.

For further information about the trip please contact

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