The Art of the Amendment

- All MEPs can table amendments during first reading
- In plenary amendment come from committees and groups

Amendments are a key way to influence and change EU law. It's a way for MEPs to bring into play the interests of voters, lobbyists, non-governmental organisations and other interest groups. Some proposals attract many hundreds of amendments, notably the annual budget. But there are strict rules to follow when tabling amendments.

First of all, what exactly is an amendment? It is a statement adding to, revising or improving a proposal. It can lead to a change in the text by deleting, adding or replacing words or figures.

"The aim of amendments is to influence Parliament's and Council's position on future laws that have a direct impact on the everyday life of all EU citizens," said Slovak Socialist Vladimír Maňka.

How the system works in the EU

The European Commission proposes draft legislation, which goes first to parliamentary committees and later to plenary. This is when MEPs can table amendments. After passing through plenary the adopted text goes to Council. Tabling amendments typically involves interaction between MEPs, political advisors, EU institutions, lobbyists, interest groups, NGOs etc, all of whom want to influence EU laws.

Dutch Christian Democrat Ria Oomen-Ruijten said she comes up with amendments "in consultation with an advisor to the (political) group, but also hears from interest groups. On this basis I form my opinion. This whole process can take months, even years to complete."

British Liberal Andrew Duff has authored of thousands of amendments and says, "amendments are fun and worthwhile. This is how we change law and shape policy."

The detail

During the first reading in committee, any MEP can table amendments. During the second reading in committee only members of the main committee handling the dossier can table amendments. When a law comes to plenary, amendments can be proposed by a committee, a political group or 40-plus MEPs.

Amendments are usually tabled in writing and can be in any of the EU's 23 official languages. They are then translated into the other languages. MEPs can also make oral amendments, but these are used much less as they can interfere with the smooth running or the clarity of a vote.

During voting, MEPs vote on amendments first and then the final text.

Core to EP life
"Negotiations between MEPs on the drafting of amendments is at the core of parliamentary life. I have often been surprised by a last minute switch in votes which secures a victory," Mr Duff said.

"An amendment is efficient if its author manages to get the support for it," Mr Maňka said. He gave increased funding for the Erasmus student exchange programme as a positive example, "thanks to which 2 million European university students have been able to study abroad and get to know the culture of other countries".

An amendment by Ms Oomen-Ruijten "makes it possible for a European residing in another EU country to receive medical treatment in his home country. Dutch pensioners who have moved to Spain for example, can now choose to be treated in the Netherlands in case of illness. In such situations it may be nice for your family to be around."