

Meeting a Politician

Annex 2 to CPRE Circular

Why meet an MP?

Meeting an MP is a valuable opportunity to engage with them and illustrate your campaign. Many politicians consistently say that they value face-to-face contact above all other kinds of communication, and it is an effective way to build rapport. You don't have to meet them in Parliament. Many will hold surgeries in their constituency on most Fridays. See the MP's website for details or contact their office.

Don't rule out approaching your MP for a meeting just because he or she is a Minister, or has another official role in Parliament. Over 90 MPs serve as members of the Government, either as Ministers with specific responsibilities for areas of Government policy, or as Whips. Others also serve either as Speaker or as Deputy Speakers.

No matter what position they occupy, all MPs still retain their responsibilities as constituency MPs, and are free, in this capacity, to make representations to other members of the Government, whether through written correspondence or informally.

You may also wish to contact a local councillor, in which case the advice and procedures set out below would apply equally. Whilst we would advise that MPs should be your primary target, if you have time you could also talk to your councillor.

Before the meeting

- Write to your MP detailing your campaign and its importance. Use our example letter to help you.
- If you hear nothing from the politician's office after approximately two weeks, follow up your letter with a phone call.
- Keep your main objectives for the meeting in mind - what is your simple, top line message?
- Think about what you want to achieve from the meeting. What would be your ideal outcome?
- What do you want the MP to do? Make sure you have a specific request for action ahead of the meeting, but don't go in with a menu of asks - one or two will do. Be solution-driven.
- If the issue is quite complex, you could prepare a short briefing paper highlighting the main points. Give this to them at the end of the meeting.
- If you are approaching an MP as the chair of a county branch or district group, consider whether or not it is possible to involve a member or supporter who is a constituent of that MP in the meeting, and if you are able to do so, make it clear in your approach to the MP that one of the people who will be visiting them is a constituent. MPs are more likely to agree to a meeting if it involves

one of their constituents (although it is entirely possible that they will still meet a local group that has members in their constituency, even if none of those visiting them are constituents).

At the meeting

- Be confident.
- Make your point quickly. You may get very limited time with an MP, so try not to stray too far from your message while in the meeting.
- Give them time to speak - listen to them and be clear that you are listening.
- Be flexible and listen to suggestions/alternatives, but keep in mind your objectives for the meeting.
- If you don't know something, it's fine to say so and to tell them you'll get back to them.
- If there is more than one of you, allocate roles; for example, one might take notes while the other leads on policy issues.

After the meeting

- It is useful to send brief notes of the meeting and the agreed actions to the MP. Email may be preferable as it will be easier to update and follow up as necessary.
- Follow up with a thank you letter - it's surprising how rarely people thank MPs for the things they do for them. Re-state your understanding of the agreed points and any actions they said they, or you, would undertake.

What to do if your meeting didn't meet your expectations?

If the MP did not agree to the actions, try to determine whether it was because:

- they are simply not interested in the issue;
- they do not have the time to commit to the cause; or
- they need further information before committing.

If the answer is one of the first two above, move on and commit your time to another MP. Be aware that in the past, some well-meaning politicians have been very interested in campaigns but unable to commit time to them.

However, instead of simply saying no, they can leave organisations hanging on waiting for them to act. While they are well-intentioned, this is frustrating for an organisation with limited resources and tight deadlines, and staff/volunteers need to be able to step back and know when to focus their energies elsewhere.

If the MP just needs more information, simply provide them any further details you have or contact national office and ask if a member of the policy team can provide more insight. Always make sure any briefing materials you send to MPs are just that, brief!

Half an hour spare? Plan your meeting

Planning and attending a meeting will usually take a bit more than half an hour. Meeting a politician is likely to be the biggest time commitment you will undertake in building relations. But, if you do have half an hour to spare, make sure you are fully prepared for your meeting and you (and other attendees) are clear about why you are meeting and what you want from the meeting.

CPRE Durham, Elizabeth Mann: Meeting an MP

We are fortunate that our MP holds regular surgeries which are open to anyone. It takes only a phone call to his constituency offices to make an appointment.

Some golden rules:

- be clear and concise as to the nature of your query/problem/concern;
- although there is a competent assistant to make notes I find it easier for all to have the information typed out and relevant background material copied. This can then be sent to their office. Constituents' concerns are wide-ranging and varied so this gives your MP a better opportunity to assess the problem;
- remember MPs have busy schedules and some issues do not even come under their jurisdiction. However, if this is the case our MP will give advice on whom to contact or in many cases will himself do that. This is far superior to constituents themselves writing and asking for information due to the volume of mail received by Ministers;
- always be polite and thank MPs for their time, so showing your appreciation; and
- be prompt. Do keep to the point and make sure beforehand that you can explain your case within the time allotted as there are other people who have appointments too.

Overall do not make too many demands. Your MP is only human!

You can amend this example letter to send to an MP

Dear Mr/Ms Smith,

I would like to introduce myself to you as the Chair of CPRE X. We are a locally active group with a high level of expertise in environmental and planning issues, and we represent X people across the county.

I am keen to draw your attention to our campaign on X. [add in here a brief summary of the campaign, include:

- what the campaign is about;
- why it is locally important and why it should be of importance for the MP; and
- the key fundamental asks for the MP. Keep these as direct and simple as possible. Try to keep the asks to two at most.]

I would welcome a meeting to discuss the campaign with you at a convenient time.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Chair/Director
CPRE X