

# How to engage your local Member of Parliament (MP)

Engaging with your local Member of Parliament (MP) is an effective way of demonstrating that you – and people in your community – care about issues of global poverty and injustice.

It can seem a daunting experience for those who have never done it before, but it needn't be scary. Your local member has the responsibility of representing the views of their electorate in Parliament, so it's important you make those views known. Part of their job is to take many meetings with groups and individuals about a range of issues and concerns so they should be pleased to hear from you.

Only a small proportion of people take time to visit their MP. If a voter feels strongly enough to contact their office, the MP will certainly take note and assume that others in their electorate feel similarly about the issue too.

There are many ways you can engage with your local MP, such as writing a letter, phoning, emailing and following them on social media. But by far the most effective form of engagement with your MP is a face-to-face meeting.

Here are World Vision's top 10 tips on how to engage your local MP.

## **Tip 1: Find your local MP**

If you are visiting, calling or writing a letter to an MP as an individual (or group of individuals), make contact with the MP for the electorate in which you live. If visiting as a group – for example, a local youth group, mothers' group or church group – visit the MP representing the electorate where your group is located.

You can find out which electorate you are in by visiting the [Australian Electoral Commission](#). You may also choose to visit any of the [Senators](#) representing your State or Territory.

## **Tip 2: Do your homework**

The more knowledge you have about your local MP the greater your opportunity to influence them. You should spend some time doing a bit of background research and a good place to start is the [Senators and Members](#) section of the Parliament House website where you can find their biography and first speech. Know what party and area he or she represents, whether they are in government and whether they have a safe or marginal seat. Check out their personal websites (most have one) to find out which issues they have taken up before and feel particularly passionate about. Have a look for statements that suggest they are

supportive of international development and thank them for their support when you engage with them.

### **Tip 3: Make an appointment**

If you plan to visit your MP, or would like to speak to them on the phone, call the MP's electorate office to set up an appointment time. Don't just show up and expect to be seen and be flexible with your scheduling.

Electorate office details can be found in the White Pages or on the Senators and Members section of the Australian Parliament [website](#). On this website you can also check when Parliament is sitting in Canberra (if requesting a meeting, ask for an appointment when Parliament is not sitting so you can meet your MP or Senator in their electorate office).

When asking for an appointment, you should explain:

- who you or your group are and that you live or meet in the member's electorate;
- when and why you would like to meet with or speak to the MP;
- who will be coming to the meeting (if a visit is planned), including whether media will be present and what you will be bringing to the meeting (eg. signed petitions); and
- what you hope to achieve.

### **Tip 4: Be prepared and organised**

Spend some time (either on your own or as part of a group) preparing what you will say to your MP. You should make a list of the items you would like to cover. It's best to limit your discussion with your MP to one issue and three items at most.

If you're meeting with an MP as a group, decide ahead of time who will lead the meeting, who will address what issues, who will speak when and for how long. A maximum of 2-5 people is preferred in a group meeting.

When preparing, think about personal stories and illustrations as these will add to your presentation. Find some anecdotes from World Vision's work in the field that can illustrate your points or provide personal stories about how you and your group are advocating for the issue at hand. Have you travelled overseas to a developing country? Have you visited a development project? Have you fundraised for a project or NGO? Do you sponsor a child? These personal examples are great to include in the conversation. Don't forget you'll also want to engage with the MP too, and ask what they think about the issue.

### **Tip 5: Make the most of your face-to-face meeting**

Normally, a 15-30 minute time slot will be set aside for your meeting. Although do keep in mind an MP may be late, have to cut a meeting short, arrive halfway through or need to cancel unexpectedly sometimes through no fault of their own. Be understanding and flexible. The MP will usually be accompanied by a staff member.

A meeting is usually divided into four segments:

1. Welcome and introductions
2. Making your case
3. Discussion
4. Wrapping up

Keep these important tips in mind:

- Remember to be clear and concise with what you want and why you're there.
- It's good to be passionate about your cause, but don't get too caught up in discussing your issue as you only have a short time to speak.
- Speak in your own words so your member knows that they're dealing with a real person – facts and figures don't win hearts and minds but personal stories do.
- Don't assume the MP knows anything about your issue. You might find you know more about a particular issue than he/she does – MPs have a wide range of issues to investigate as part of their job and can't be experts in all of them. Speak at a basic level and avoid using lingo, acronyms and abbreviations (eg. MDGs, ODA). Be quick to jump ahead if you're told, or if you can see that the MP is familiar with the issue.
- If you are in a group, be careful not to contradict each other, or talk over the top of your MP.
- If your MP seems to be getting off-topic, gently try to bring them back to it.
- Be respectful, but firm. Don't be intimidated or afraid to bring up tough issues. Question an MP on past votes or positions taken or ask for a definitive answer. Remember though that professionalism and a sense of committed determination will go further than name-calling or attacks. Never be rude.
- If you don't know the answer, just say so. You don't need to be an expert. It's enough to say who you are and why you care about an issue. Be as responsive as you can be but don't make things up. You can always get back to them with an answer after the meeting.
- Local MPs are interested in what's going on in their local community, so let them know what you/your group are doing on this issue.



- Use an MP's correct title (Senator, Minister or Mr/Mrs) and surname (for example, Mr/Mrs Smith or Senator Smith) unless you're invited to use his or her first name. If you're invited to meet with other staff members, don't underestimate their importance or influence; treat those meetings as if they were with the MP.
- Make sure you let your MP know what you would like to come of this meeting (see Tip 6: Be clear about your "ask"). Make sure you also send a follow-up email or letter in the week following your meeting, thanking the MP for their time, and reminding them about the agreed ask.
- Visual aids are useful in your meeting and can make a great photo opportunity. Think about taking a prop that helps explain your issue – it's something you can leave with the MP as a lasting reminder of your visit.
- At the end of the meeting, thank the MP for their time, even if they don't agree with your position. Remember that you're aiming to build a relationship with them.
- You can also leave your MP with a set of briefing notes, outlining the key points of your meeting and the action you're requesting. One or two pages is best.
- Keep track of replies from your MP and respond to replies. You can also use their comments in other forms of influencing (letter to the editor, talkback radio etc). Sometimes it's easier to get local media interest if your MP is engaged in the issue and is backing it.

See our tips for engaging local media guide for more information.

### **Tip 6: Be clear about your "ask"**

The point of engaging with your MP will be to ask them to do something about the issue you're raising. One of the mistakes people often make when lobbying MPs is to make contact but not ask them to do anything. What is it you want your MP to do? Don't be afraid to ask – acting on behalf of his/her constituents is a normal part of a politician's life. Make your pitch clear, concise and compelling.

Examples of asks might be for your MP to:

- pass on your local petition to the responsible Minister;
- reflect your views to leaders within their party;
- endorse a particular campaign;
- provide quotes for a media release;
- attend an event;

- use their contacts to help publicise an issue; or
- raise your issue in a speech to Parliament.

Work out beforehand what you will be asking your MP to do and plan to finish your visit, phone call or letter by informing the MP how you would like to follow up on the issue with them.

### **Tip 7: Making the most of your phone meeting**

If you can't arrange a face-to-face meeting with your MP, or would prefer to talk to them on the phone, then arranging time for a phone conversation is also a way to engage with MPs. Prepare for this conversation in the same way you would for a meeting – by researching the MP, putting together an agenda of points and by making an appointment. Be clear about your purpose for the phone call, explain yourself clearly and ask for the MP to commit to an action at the end of your call.

### **Tip 8: Effective letter writing**

Writing to your MP is another good way of letting them know what issues are concerning people in their electorate. But, your MP receives huge amounts of mail/email and if it's bulk postcards or petitions it can be difficult to know which, if any, are from their constituents. Hand-written or printed (and signed) letters or personal email, with your name and address clearly identified, guarantee the best cut-through.

Occasion cards such as birthday, Christmas, Mother's Day or Father's Day cards are also personal and very effective. For example, sending an MP a card on their birthday with a message about supporting overseas aid so more children survive past five helps demonstrate your cause but also that you know a few details about him/her.

Writing to your MP to invite them to an event related to your issue is also effective. Whether it's a movie night or a meeting with influential people in your community, an invitation lets the MP know that you're working on the issue in their electorate. Always make the case for their attendance at your event. For example:

*This film night highlights the extent of people-trafficking in our region. We are expecting more than 300 people to attend, the majority of whom will be from your electorate. This is a great opportunity to show your support and let them know your position on the issue.*

Keep these important tips in mind:

- Address the MP by the title given to them on the Parliament House website (Mr

Smith MP/The Hon Mr Smith MP/ Senator Smith/Senator The Hon Mr Smith).

- Start the letter by explaining who you and/or your group are, and the issue you would like to present. Keep to one issue per letter.
- Use simple language, be concise and keep your letter to a single page. Feel free to provide facts and figures where relevant, but make sure to keep your letter conversational so that the MP understands it's coming from a real person.
- Finish the letter by asking your MP to take a certain action (ie. what you want them to do in response to your issue).
- Include your contact details in the letter and request a reply from the MP about how they will respond to the issue you have raised.
- Sign the letter and address it to the MP's electoral and/or parliamentary office.

### **Tip 9: Get the media involved**

If you are meeting with your MP, see if you can get local media to cover it. Alternatively, ask the MP if you can take a photo of the meeting which you can send to the media later.

Having a letter published in a newspaper's Letters to the Editor section or speaking on talkback radio could mean your message is received by thousands of people. Not only do lots of people tune in to newspapers and radio but MPs also pay attention to them.

Also, MPs are often looking for good photos for their own newsletter, so they might be eager to include a story around your visit and support for an issue.

### **Tip 10: Use social media**

One final way to engage with your MP can be through social media. While not every MP has a Twitter account or Facebook page, many do, so it's worth looking (you can start by finding Australian politicians on [Twitter](#)). Posting a comment to their page or feed can be a great way of starting a conversation with them, or at least showing them – and readers of their site – what people are thinking about. You could also like things on Facebook and retweet comments on Twitter that are positive and align with what you're advocating for.

While you're online, see if your MP has a blog and leave a comment there too.

See our tips for engaging using social media guide for more information.



**And finally, let World Vision know about it!**

If you meet with an MP, please let World Vision know. We want to know what our local activists are doing and, where possible, link to these local stories so we can inspire others to get out there and do the same. Please email us an update and a photo to [campaigns@worldvision.com.au](mailto:campaigns@worldvision.com.au).

*Please remember that when engaging your local Member of Parliament you should be careful not to give the impression that you are a spokesperson or representative of World Vision Australia or that your activity is endorsed by World Vision Australia.*