

from the *Independent Group*

How To Lobby Government Effectively

At its simplest, lobbying is simply letting those who make decisions know what you think. You might be trying to reach your member of parliament, a minister or a civil servant.

At its most complex, it's about getting those people to take the decision you want. You might want to put road humps outside your child's school or CCTV in a local car park. You might want planning permission refused for someone trying to build flats on a playing field. You might want to support the removal of an act of parliament.

Maybe you just want to persuade your local MP, MSP, AM or MEP to come along to your youth club and tell the members what a good job they're doing.

In short, then, lobbying is talking to the establishment.

First steps as a lobbyist

You need to decide exactly what you hope to achieve by lobbying, who can help, what motivates them, who could catch their eye. You need to be clear about your facts. Lobbying isn't about persuading people to do something by the force of your personality. It's about giving the right people the right information at the right time in the right way.

In deciding who you need to speak to, you need to ask yourself a series of questions:

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- ?? Through forming or joining an effective pressure group. These carry weight. Get a group behind you. Appear more representative. Grab headlines.
- ?? Through the press. Even more than most, this government responds to the media agenda. Go for the Daily Mail and the Sun.

How to approach an MP

- ?? Write to your MP at the House Of Commons, but be aware that most MPs simply pass on all constituents' correspondence to the appropriate minister for their comments. It's possible that your MP just becomes a bureaucratic post office between you and the government.
- ?? Go and see your MP at the House Of Commons. If you can, fix an appointment before you go. If you can't, you can go to Central Lobby and fill in a card for the attendants to find your MP and bring him or her to you. This often doesn't work.
- ?? Go to your MP's constituency surgery. Some MPs meet their constituents on a first-come first-served basis. Others insist on appointments being made. Check with the constituency office or the MP's House Of Commons office whether an appointment is necessary before you go.

What's the best approach?

It depends on your MP. Some are very active on constituency matters, and respond very positively to any approach from constituents. Others will do little more than act as a post-box unless the issue particularly interests them. So when you approach your MP:

- ?? Try to work out what will interest him or her, and make sure this is highlighted in your first approach.
- ?? If possible, make it clear that you represent a group of his or her constituents, that you're not just acting on your own.
- ?? Make sure you understand what position he or she has been taking on the issue before you make your approach. Read your local newspapers. Check whether your MP has a web site. Check Hansard to see if the issue has been raised in the House Of Commons and whether your MP has made any comments.
- ?? Know what you want him or her to do. MPs will often ask you what you want to do to help. If you know, and you have a plan by which you can involve them, you can respond positively. If you don't know, you don't have a plan, you'll be losing a golden opportunity.

Going directly to the minister

You can try going straight to the top, but:

- ?? Ministers do not reply to letters from members of the public. If you write simply as a citizen to a minister, you're likely to receive a reply from a low-ranking civil servant.
- ?? Government departments are organised so that ordinary citizens find it difficult to speak directly to ministers.
- ?? Ministers are unlikely to see letters from "ordinary people". These are filtered to a civil servant for reply.

To make sure that the minister sees your letter, you need to do one of the following:

- ?? Write it as a constituent. Ministers' offices ensure that ministers see all of their constituents' letters immediately. The minister will give a personal reply - though the letter will still be drafted by civil servants.
- ?? Write as a representative of a nationally recognised body or a local body with plenty of clout. If the minister's office believes that you represent a significant organisation, it's possible that the civil servants handling the letter will ask the minister to sign a personal reply will ask the minister to sign a reply himself or herself.
- ?? You can always try opening the letter: "As a lifetime Labour supporter..." (obviously so long as it is a Labour government). It sometimes works!

How to motivate a minister

- ?? Get press interest. Contact the minister's local newspaper or try to contact the Lobby (political) correspondents of one of the serious newspapers. Under New Labour, "serious newspapers" includes the Sun and the Daily Mail as well as the more traditional broadsheets.
- ?? Personal interest. If the issue is something the minister has campaigned about in the past, your campaign may spark an interest.
- ?? Political risk. The minister will act if there's a risk of being criticised for neglecting your issue. You need to make it seem likely that the risk exists.
- ?? Political advantage. The minister will take a personal interest if there's a chance that taking your side will result in a popular decision.

How to generate political interest

Approach people who matter to the minister:

- ?? Special advisers. All Cabinet ministers have one or two special advisers in their departments. Special advisers are political appointments (technically appointed as temporary civil servants). Their job is to give their ministers political advice alongside the official advice offered by the civil service. Some concentrate more on policy development (the so-called policy wonks) while others concentrate on their ministers' public image (the so-called spin doctors).
- ?? Parliamentary private secretary. All senior ministers have a PPS, an MP who acts as the minister's eyes and ears in parliament and among the minister's political colleagues.
- ?? Policy advisers and researchers at party headquarters.
- ?? Their constituency agent and chairman of the local constituency party.
- ?? Some local councillors within their constituency. Relationships between councillors and MPs vary dramatically according to personalities.

Meetings with civil servants

Accept the offer of a meeting with a civil servant. Bear in mind that:

- ?? Civil servants advise ministers on policy from a non-political standpoint.
- ?? They will assess your case on the basis of facts and logic rather than political expediency.
- ?? They will try to act in accordance with the government's policies, but only on the basis of helping to implement them. They won't be developing the political theory behind policy.

Most importantly, like the rest of us, civil servants want an easy life. So make it easy for them:

- ?? Have all the facts to hand.
- ?? Explain why you want them to advocate the change you feel is necessary.
- ?? If they ask questions you can't answer, promise to come back with the answers.
- ?? Remember to do so!
- ?? Leave a note with them of your main points and arguments.
- ?? Write to them after the meeting reminding them of their promises.
- ?? Follow-up after two or three weeks and ask them what progress they have made.
- ?? Write to the minister, thanking him for arranging the meeting, and telling him what the civil servants said they would do.

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