

Engaging your MP: getting involved in the policy making process

This paper is relevant to school and college leaders in England and Wales.

It contains advice to help you make contact with and develop a good dialogue with your MP. This may be because you have an issue with a specific individual or situation or because you have wider concerns or suggestions about local and national policy.

Schools, sixth form colleges and FE colleges are complex, often large organisations and many people have a stake in them. Your MP will be interested to know your views not least because of the impact they may have on his or her constituents, and hopefully they will be eager to help where they can.

For more information on how you can get involved in the democratic process and for useful advice and links, see the Parliament website (links are also provided in Further information at the end of this paper).

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1 Overview

What can your MP do to help?

Your MP can help in a number of ways including:

- write to or meet the relevant person, organisation, official or minister to raise your concern or to try to sort it out
- raising issues in the House of Commons. For example, by asking an oral question (ministers answer questions on a rota basis, the number is limited) or tabling a written question. Replies to written questions are written by civil servants, approved by ministers and published in Hansard (the parliamentary record that can be accessed via the Parliament website, link provided in Further information)
- requesting an adjournment debate - half an hour usually set at the end of the day, requests are chosen from a ballot or by the Speaker

However, please note that if your MP is a minister, Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) or opposition spokesperson they may be restricted in doing some aspects mentioned above.

If you are not sure what they could do, ask the MP what they can do to help.



2 Making contact with your MP

Who to contact?

Whether you have concerns about a local issue or national policy, your local MP is often a good place to start. The Parliament website has contact details or you can call the House of Commons Information Office on 020 7219 4272.

You may also consider contacting the relevant government or shadow ministers. Details for the current ministerial team are on the DfE website and details of the shadow ministerial team on their party website.

If your issue is a very specific one you may also find out who may be sympathetic by looking at membership of the Parliamentary All Party Groups, which indicates the subjects MPs and Lords are particularly interested in.

Links to the sections of the Parliament website mentioned above are provided in Further information at the end of this paper.

Make it personal

Probably the most useful advice is to make your approach personal so that it stands out from the hundreds of standardised emails and letters they receive daily.

Former Lib Dem MP, Baroness Lynne Featherstone, said: “My advice to those who seek my support is to think about me. Think about my time commitment. Think what will really benefit the cause – and what you really want me to do, and how to break it down into simple, easy to get started requests. Then you will build up a dialogue and in time a long-term relationship... The lobbyists who provide local statistics, local activities, local information etc – they are the ones who really get through.”

Write to or email your MP

Virtually all MPs and peers now use email and most provide email addresses to the public. Whether you decide to email or send a letter by post will depend on your own style of communication and that of your MP.

Email addresses are available on the Parliament website (link provided in Further information), from the House of Commons Information Office on 020 7219 4272 or from your MP's own website, if they have one.

You can write to your MP either at their constituency office or at:

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

When composing your email or letter think about the outcome you hope to achieve, for example, you may want to ask your MP to raise an issue with the relevant minister. Include specific questions and request a written response to your concerns. It is always useful to point out how your concerns will affect constituents.

Keep your letter short and to the point.

If you do not receive a response within a reasonable period (two weeks, unless your concern is urgent) write a follow up letter or email.

Arranging a meeting

One of the best ways to get your message across is to meet face-to-face. Most MPs hold regular constituency surgeries (usually Fridays or weekends) but consider inviting them to visit your school or college or arranging an individual meeting.

When writing to request a meeting, highlight your main points of concern and enclose any documentation. It is always useful to point how your concerns will affect constituents.

Keep your letter short and straight to the point.

If you do not receive a response within a reasonable period (two weeks, unless your concern is urgent) follow up by letter or email.

Preparation

Before the meeting, it is worth thinking about what you hope to achieve, for example, do you want to:

- influence their views
- persuade them that many other constituents share your concerns
- ask them to pass on your concerns to an organisation, individual, the government or relevant ministers
- ask them to take appropriate action
- establish a relationship so you can engage in future

Make sure you prepare fully and if possible do some research on their personal or professional background to see if there are areas of common ground, and to help build a good rapport. For example, you could find out where they grew up, where they went to school, if they are a school governor, whether they have any children and find out what their interests are. Try also to find out what their views are on your area of concern and their more general views.

Try to find out whether there is a party policy on the issue. Look at their record as an individual MP – you can see whether they take a particular interest in this area, and whether they have rebelled or stayed loyal to party policy on the website ‘they work for you’ (link provided in Further information).

Make it easy for them, consider providing a written summary of your concerns, point out how they affect their constituents and outline what you want them to do about it.

Even if your concern is a national issue, it is useful to have a local angle. The MP wants to know how this issue affects his or her constituents. Talk about how this issue is affecting others in their constituency; case studies and anecdotes can be very persuasive.

If there are other people who share your concerns, say so and if you can find out or estimate how many people in the constituency are affected, provide this information too. Your MP will appreciate knowing how many voters are involved.

The meeting

Assume that the MP is there to help you and use the meeting as an opportunity for a two-way discussion. At the end of the meeting, discuss with your MP the best course of action and make sure this is understood on both sides before you leave.

Follow up your visit with a letter of thanks, providing further information and make contact again after about two weeks to ask for an update on progress. Follow up on any responses and let your MP know of any new developments. Hopefully this meeting will be the start of a longer relationship.



3 Dealing with Government

Responding to a Select Committee Inquiry

Select committees examine the spending, policies and administration of government departments. There are many select committees, such as the Education Select Committee and the Business, Innovation and Skills Select Committee.

Select committee inquiries can range from an in-depth examination of a complex issue to a single evidence inquiry on a pertinent subject. For example, at the time of writing, the Education Select Committee has ongoing inquiries into the child protection system, home education, careers guidance, pre-legislative scrutiny of special educational needs reform, Sure Start centres, the role of school governing bodies, reforming Key Stage 4 qualifications and the role of health visitors in school readiness.

Findings from these inquiries are reported to Parliament. The government usually has 60 days to reply to a committee's recommendations.

It is difficult to measure objectively the effectiveness or influence of select committees but governments do often accept select committee recommendations, even when they were not originally disposed to do so. The current Education Select Committee has a strong track record in calling government to account over its policies even if those policies are not always changed as a result.

When a select committee launches a new inquiry, they generally publish a call for written evidence from all interested parties. This evidence is used to help shape the inquiry and may influence the witnesses called to give oral evidence. In recent years, select committees have also increasingly used web forums to help gather material for inquiries.

ASCL will alert members through its weekly email newsletter when there are important new inquiries. You can also find recent and current inquiries and published reports as well as details of membership and contact details on the Parliament website (the link to the Education Select Committee is provided in Further information). There are also links on this web page for subscribing to email alerts for particular committees.

Responding to a government consultation

Most government departments, including the DfE and BIS publish all their consultations online. Search via the Government website via Publications or consultations (direct links are provided in Further information). Responses can easily be completed online or on a provided Word document. ASCL will alert members when there are important consultations and may invite members to input into ASCL responses. You may also wish to contact ASCL directly to make sure that a particular point is being made in its response or you may prefer to send your own response and details of where to send are detailed online and on the response form.

Any interested member of the public can respond to a government consultation. Make sure you make clear who you are. Try to keep your answers to the point. Examples and anecdotes can, however, be highly persuasive. Make sure you provide contact details should officials wish to follow up anything you say in your response.

If you respond to a government consultation or input into an ASCL response, consider sending a copy to your local MP.

Submitting evidence to a public bill committee

Rarely, you may consider an aspect of draft legislation passing through Parliament so important that you wish to submit evidence to a public bill committee. After the second reading of a bill (the first time Parliament debates the bill), it is usually referred to a public bill committee for further scrutiny. These committees will often invite evidence from the public to help them effectively scrutinise the bill.

Public bill committees can request written evidence from outside organisations and members of the public. They also take oral evidence (usually at the start of proceedings), beginning with evidence from the relevant minister and departmental officials. Other witnesses are likely to include related agencies, interested non-governmental organisations, lobby groups and individuals with an interest.

If you think you should be considered to give evidence to a public bill committee, your first point of contact should be the departmental officials responsible for the bill, details will be published on the Parliament website.

Asking your MP to vote on or table an amendment

You can also ask your MP or any peer or MP to put forward (table) an amendment to a bill going through Parliament, or to vote for or against an amendment to a bill.

Online discussions, blogging and social media

Use of blogging and social media can be hugely influential and deserves a guidance paper of its own.

Sam Freedman, former policy adviser to Michael Gove posted the following tweet on 22 January 2013, “I think you seriously underestimate the influence blogs + twitter already have on policymakers. I’ve been vastly more influenced by twitter debates + blogs than traditional ways of ‘influencing’ policy-makers.”

For interest, the most popular teacher on Twitter is @teachertoolkit who was nominated in Debrett’s 500 Most Influential People in Britain January 2015 (a link to @teachertoolkit’s blog is provided in Further information).

Increasingly, Parliament is using online channels other than email to invite comments from the public. This can be via web forums or through social media channels. You can also follow individual MPs, Parliament and others on Twitter, Facebook and other social media sites.

Create or start a petition in Parliament

E-petitions are an easy way for you to make sure your concerns are heard by Government and Parliament.

You can ask your MP to present a petition, start your own or add your voice to an existing one on the new e-petitions website launched in 2015 (link provided in Further information).

Early Day Motions (EDMs)

EDMs are an important way for backbench MPs to raise a particular concern with Parliament. They take the form of a written motion and although they are very rarely debated, they give MPs a chance to make a political point and/or to gauge support from other MPs (who can sign up to it). EDMs can cover a very wide range of issues from those of national and international importance to those about local issues and individuals. A list of current EDMs are available on the Parliament website (link in Further information)



Keeping you informed

ASCL will keep you informed via the weekly email newsletter of any important changes to policy and any important relevant consultations and inquiries. You may also want to consider:

- getting email updates from Parliament, for example, particular committees, for specific bills, topics
- looking on 'They work for you' website (link provided in Further information) This site contains information on your MP's activity (including their voting record). You can use it to see debates, written answers and see what is coming up in Parliament. You can also sign up for email updates on activity relating to particular parliamentarians or subjects
- signing up for email alerts and RSS feeds, many websites have this facility so you can keep up to date with a particular issue or person

4 Local councillors

If your concerns relate to a local issue, it may be worth contacting your local councillor. Your local council website should provide their contact details.

What can your councillor do to help?

A good relationship with one or more of your local councillors can be very useful in a number of ways, including:

- providing inside information on what is going on in your local area
- representing your case on a particular issue(s) to the council and in committees
- influencing other councillors and officers

If you are not sure what they could do, ask the councillor what they can do to help.

Write to or email your local councillor

When composing your communication, think about the outcome you hope to achieve. For example, you may want to ask your councillor to raise an issue with the council. Include specific questions and request a written response. Keep your letter short and to the point.

Arranging a meeting

One of the best ways to get your message across is to meet face-to-face. Many councillors hold regular surgeries but consider inviting them to visit your school or college or arranging an individual meeting. When writing to request a meeting, try to highlight your main points of concern and enclose any documentation. It is always useful to point out how your concerns will affect local people. Keep your letter short and to the point.

Local authority officers

The make-up of local councils varies considerably. In some cases it may be worth contacting the relevant officer directly. If your issue is specific and you can put together detailed and sensible proposals that they can implement with little further work, this may be the best way of achieving what you want. Remember that officers may sometimes feel caught between councillors and the public – your particular situation will determine your best approach.

5 Further information

Parliament website <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/>

Hansard, via Parliament website <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/hansard/>

Local MPs list www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/mps/

Current Cabinet Minister and shadow Cabinet minister list

www.education.gov.uk/aboutdfe/departmentalinformation/ministerialteam

All Party Parliamentary groups <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmllparty/memi01.htm>

'They work for you' website <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/>

Education Select Committee

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/>

Publications page https://www.gov.uk/government/publications?publication_filter_option=consultations

DfE consultations <https://www.education.gov.uk/aboutdfe/departmentalinformation/consultations>

Teacher Toolkit blog <http://www.teachertoolkit.me/>

Start a petition in Parliament <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/sign-a-petition/>

Parliament EDMs

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/business-papers/commons/early-day-motions/>

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