

Hints and tips guide to working with MPs

1. The Parliamentary week

Parliament normally sits between Monday lunch time and Thursdays each week, which is when MPs are likely to be in Westminster. If you are planning an event in the constituency that you wish an MP to attend, the best time is on a Friday or on a Saturday morning. You may also be able to get their attention on a Thursday evening.

Parliament has regular breaks and during these the MPs are likely to be around on any day of the week unless they are away on Parliamentary business and occasionally on holiday. The breaks (recesses) mostly mirror school holidays except for the summer recess which is from the end of July until the second week in October.

2. What can MPs do for our organisation?

MPs have a wide range of tools that they can call upon to help promote your interests. MPs are very useful for:

- Raising an issue in Parliament through asking an oral or a written question which receives a direct response from the Minister. This can be to make a point or to elicit information that otherwise might take longer to emerge from an enquiry made direct to a Government department.
- Speaking in debates to raise a point
- When MPs write to a Minister they receive a personal reply rather than from an official
- Having guaranteed access to the local press
- Organising a delegation to meet a Minister
- Chairing or speaking at an event – raising publicity

- If your MP is a Government Minister they do not have the same range of options in terms of parliamentary procedures (e.g. they cannot ask questions or sign motions) but this will not prevent him/her from raising your case in other ways, including writing to a fellow Minister.

3. Contacting an MP

3.1 Identifying an MP and their contact details

Pick the MP for either where you live, or for where your project/organisation is based.

The contact details of an MP can be found in a variety of ways. Visit <http://www.parliament.uk> and enter your postcode to find out who your MP is and their Westminster contact details. To find the constituency address of your MP use a search engine to find their personal website. Local authority websites will have contact details of MPs in their area and will have details of which MP covers which area.

It is better to contact the MP via their constituency office rather than Westminster. By doing so you are more likely to speak to an assistant who will be able to help straight away. It also allows for relationship building between the arts organisation and the MP's constituency staff which can have advantages for future requests for meetings or invites to events.

If you are a city/area wide arts organisation rather than just active in your immediate area, then it might be more appropriate to get a person who lives in the constituency of the MP you wish to meet to contact them first. Giving a constituency angle to an MP is always more advantageous.

It is also useful to research whether your MP has an existing interest in the arts or related issues to your work.

3.2 Writing to the MP

MPs will receive about 100 pieces of post a day. These will be opened by the MP's staff. To make sure the staff pass on your communication it needs to be targeted at the MP making reference to their constituency or any particular interests.

In presenting a case to an MP:

- Stick to one issue per letter

- Explain clearly and early why you are writing and what concerns you have or what you support
- Be factually correct. Ensure that everything you say can be backed up.
- Keep the letter brief. Two pages should be the absolute maximum and in most cases you should aim to complete the correspondence on one side of A4 paper.
- Never use standard or photocopied letters. A personal approach is the key.
- The main arguments should have a constituency focus. This is important - MPs will be much more responsive to how an issue is causing a problem in their own area than to the national scene.
- Ask for your MP's personal views and not the political party line.
- Show that you expect a reply and ask your MP to do something. This should be to:
 - Write to the Minister to ask them to take action
 - Meet to discuss this issue with you
 - Raise the issue in Parliament
 - Publicise an issue in the local press
 - Attend an event or pay a visit

Ask them to notify you when they have done what you asked.

3.3 Sending an Email

All of the above apply with the additional points:

- Ensure that in the subject line you indicate the constituency link
- You can send your letter as an attachment
- Keep a message even briefer than you would in a letter

4. Meeting the MP

4.1 Representatives

If you have arranged to meet the MP in their constituency office about an issue don't go mob handed - 3 or 4 people from the organisation is the maximum.

4.2 Timings

Most meetings with MPs are on average half hour slots. Therefore always be clear and concise with your arguments and what you wish from the MP. The aim would be to do a pitch to the MP for no longer than 10-15 minutes to allow for discussion and agreements moving forward to be finalised.

5. Inviting MPs to events

Take into account the MPs parliamentary schedule – and aim to send an initial invitation at least one month prior to the event you wish the MP to attend. If you are putting on refreshments say so in the invitation. Again, if there is a relevant constituency angle to the event then use it as MPs get invited to a large number of events and those with a constituency angle are likely to be looked at more favourably.

5.1 Firming up the invite

Once the MP has agreed to attend it is important to firm up the invite by sending a letter detailing:

- An itinerary of the visit / proceedings - show a finish time and refreshment details (check dietary requirements)
- Location details, a map and transport (eg collecting from a station or a car parking space)
- Contact details of a person on the day whom the MP or the MP's office can call should there be any problems
- Who will be there, in particular any other important guests
- Background briefing about the organisation
- Make it clear if the MP is expected to say a few words or make a speech
- If the press have been notified (see below)
- If it is an award ceremony, then details of who is receiving the award should be supplied

This information should be sent no later than a week before the event.

5.2 Press

All MPs like publicity and being associated with good news.

MPs who are members of the governing party particularly will want to be associated with the benefits of their Government's programmes.

- Liaise with the MP's office about inviting or informing the press about the MP's visit
- Help create good photo opportunities
- Where you have meetings with an MP, discuss the possible involvement of the press beforehand, including arranging a photograph. The meeting will probably be private, and if you are going to talk to the press afterwards, you should agree with the MP what will be said.

6. Thank you

Lastly, it would be polite to write to the MP to thank him/her for their time meeting with you or for attending an event and reminding them of any follow-up that they promised to do.

7. Ministers and Shadow Ministers

Ministers and Shadow Ministers are particularly busy and if you are planning to invite them to an event you will need to give them at least two months notice. It is therefore often best to put a call into their staff before you have all the details ready just so that you can check out if they are likely to be free on the required date.

The Arts Council can help you with Ministerial invitations. Contact your regional Communications Officer who will liaise with the Arts Council's Public Affairs team.