

Regional Asylum Activism Briefing

Influencing Decision Makers

Campaigning is about changing hearts and minds. Often the hearts and minds you need to target are those of the people making key political and policy decisions. We've written this briefing to give you a bit of an idea about how to effectively influence decision-makers, especially your parliamentary representatives, in order to achieve the changes you want to see!

We'll cover some broad ideas about how to build and grow your campaign, before looking at how you can influence people in power!

Building and Growing Your Campaign

Campaigns are often born out of somebody's lived experience of injustice. Someone, somewhere, experiences injustice (either personally or as a witness) and believes that it is not right. They often find others with a shared experience, and start to identify the heart of the issue.

This process is at the heart of **grassroots campaigning**. The voices of people with direct experience of the issue form your evidence base and the wider community concerned come up with solutions to the problem. This is the community politics of grassroots campaigning.

When you're growing your campaign, it's important to recognise the different skills and expertise organisations and individuals can bring to your movement. You're at your least effective when you're a lone voice, so many successful campaigns are built through **informal and formal coalitions of organisations and individuals working together towards a common goal**.

Working with others can show decision-makers that there's a significant public will for change; decision makers can be persuaded by the sheer number of people asking for change to happen! Different organisations and individuals will also have new skills, expertise and avenues of influence which can all work together to grow your campaign. Think about who your decision-maker is most likely to trust, who's got a large supporter base, who's got experience in online campaigning; this will help strengthen your campaign and ensure everyone can contribute. Importantly, make sure you don't just involve the 'usual suspects' in your coalition. **Some of the most successful campaigns have brought together non-traditional allies under a joint campaign goal.**

Key Things to Remember!

- After identifying the heart of your campaign, make sure you've got a **good evidence base!** Make sure you've got local statistics (if possible), good stories, and clear, concise solutions.
- Think about **engaging powerful allies**, be that **someone with political power** or someone within the **media**. This can help publicise your issue, build a stronger voice for your campaign, and frame the debate.
- **Recognise the opportunities and challenges of campaigning from the grassroots up!** It can be time-consuming and resource heavy, but the power of people speaking from direct experience cannot be underestimated!
- **Make sure you plan but don't miss out on opportunities!** It's important to be strategic when you're campaigning, especially when working with a broad coalition, but make sure you don't spend all your time talking and not taking action! Keep your eye on the ground and look for key opportunities to get your voice heard.



Who's Got the Power?

When you're thinking about what you want to change, you need to think about who can make that change happen! This is sometimes called a **'power analysis.'** This essentially means identifying who holds the power, who they listen to and how you can change their minds. You don't want to direct your whole campaign towards someone who does not have the power or the responsibility to change anything!

Think about what it is that you want to see changed and then consider who is involved in designing the policy, making the political decisions or delivering the service. For example, if you were interested in campaigning on increasing asylum support rates, you'd want to target the Minister of State for Immigration and Security. However, if you wanted a local school to provide training for their staff on refugee issues, you'd want to target the Board of Governors and the Headteacher. It's often helpful to run through the 'Problem – Solution – Ask' framework when thinking this through. Make sure that your targeted decision maker can deliver your 'ask'!

For the purpose of this briefing, we'll focus mainly on how to influence **MPs and local Councillors.** However, pretty much all of our strategies and tactics can be used to influence other people in power. Think about those who have control of a budget; people who are writing policy; people who are commissioning services; people who are organising arts events! They all have power to do things in different ways!

Before You Contact Your MP

So, after identifying the problem, solution and ask, you've decided that you need to get your local MP on board in order to advance your campaign. **Here are some key tips to prepare for that first meeting with your Parliamentary representative:**

1. **Do some research into your political representatives!** The internet is a great resource to find out about your local MP. You can engage with them by connecting with their existing areas of interest. Are they part of the current government or the opposition? Are they part of an All Party Parliamentary Group on a particular issue? What have they been talking about in Parliament recently? Check out the brilliant website www.theyworkforyou.com to learn more about your MP. You can also look at the Parliament UK website for in depth information about your representative's political history.
2. **Make sure you've done your research!** Be prepared for your MP to ask you further questions about your campaign. Imagine it's a bit like a job interview: try to prepare for the most difficult question you can imagine!
3. **Make sure you have a clear and concise ask!** Don't ask for the impossible, but think about things that they might be able to do. You can try to build up a relationship, asking for smaller things first and more ambitious things when you've established their trust.

How to Contact Your Representative

Every person living in the UK will have their own constituency MP. MPs are responsible for a specific area and everyone living within it. MPs have a duty to respond to inquiries from their constituents, but they do **not** have a duty to respond to inquiries from people who are **not their constituents.** It is possible to contact other MPs, but only if they hold a portfolio relevant to your campaign. For example, if you were campaigning on women's' issues, you could contact the Minister for Women and Equalities, even if they weren't your local MP.



The first thing to do is work out who is your MP! At www.writetothem.com you can enter your postcode and find out who represents you in your Local Council (local Councillors), in Westminster (MPs) and in Europe (Members of the European Parliament).

You can either write to your MP (by email or post) or arrange a time to meet with them and discuss your concerns. MPs often hold drop-in 'surgeries' in their constituencies – mainly on Thursdays, Fridays or Saturdays – where constituents can meet with their MP. You can find out more about this on your MP's website.

What Can Your MP Do For You?

It's always important to remember what matters to an MP. MPs have to balance the demands of representing the people of their constituency, supporting the goals of their political party, and working on issues that are important to them as an individual. On top of this they may be concerned about getting re-elected, getting a promotion to a more senior role, public popularity and even simple petty politics.

However, MPs are voted in by their constituents; they are there to represent the concerns and interests of the public! Always remember your own power as experts by experience; if you have done your research about your key issue, you are likely to know a lot more about it than your MP does. When you're thinking about approaching your MP, you need to think about what they can actually do for you. MPs can take on casework for individual advocacy, but they also have power at a Westminster level to effect change.

Things you can ask your MP to do:

- Sponsor or support amendments to a Bill
- Raise an issue with the relevant Minister
- Lobby internally for changes to their own party's policies or priorities
- Put down a Parliamentary Question
- Take up an issue via Select Committees / All Party Parliamentary Groups
- Table a Private Members' Bill
- Host a Meeting in Parliament or elsewhere
- Sponsor or sign an Early Day Motion

After meeting your MP, make sure you follow up on any actions promptly! If they requested evidence, make sure you provide it; if they showed interest in taking an action such as asking a Parliamentary Question or visiting your Charity make sure you firm up the arrangements while they're fresh in both your minds. After all your work, you don't want them to lose interest!

What Can Your Local Councillor Do For You?

Local Councils are made up of Councillors (members) who are elected by the public. Local Councils provide a wide range of services, either directly through their staff (often known as Officers) or by commissioning services from outside organisations. City Councils are responsible for: education; transport; planning; fire and public safety; social care; public health; libraries; waste management; trading standards.

You will more than likely have 3 local councillors representing you at a local level. They vote in Council meetings and scrutinise the spending of local budgets. Some will be 'Executive Members' and be responsible for particular departments (e.g. Children's Services). Councillors, like MPs, hold regular surgeries where they listen to the problems of local residents. Each Councillor will also be a member of a political party. You can find out more about your Councillors on your Council's website.

Things you can ask your Local Councillor to do:

- Raise your concerns with the leader of the Council
- Raise your concerns at relevant meetings: e.g. Health and Wellbeing Boards, Adult Safeguarding Meetings
- Contact relevant local MPs to raise the profile of your local concerns
- Make representation to the next full Council meeting on your issue.

Tips For Writing a Letter to Your MP/ Councillor

Whether you get in touch with your representative by email or by post, it's good to think a bit about how you introduce yourself and your campaign. Remember to always include your name and address! This is very important when contacting constituency MPs, as it proves that you're a member of their constituency and they are therefore duty-bound to respond. It's also good to keep it relatively short and to the point. MPs receive a large number of letters and emails every day from their constituents; make sure yours stands out and is clear and concise. Again, the 'Problem – Solution – Ask' framework is a simple way to ensure that your letter stays on track. Finally, try to start on a positive note! Always give credit when credit's due.



Quick Tip! Have a look at some of the letters used by other campaign groups to get some inspiration! You'll notice that they're short, punchy and have a clear request. Perhaps use one as a template for your own campaign!

Tips For Working with the Media

In some cases, you'll want to use the media to extend the reach of your campaign. Whether you want to raise the profile of your campaign issue with the public or political representatives, the media can be an excellent platform to shift attitudes and change minds.

However, working with the media can be difficult. The media is interested in stories that are **new, exciting and sell papers or get people to tune in to the telly/ radio**. Sometimes their agenda may be different from yours. Before engaging with the media, think about the different risks and benefits you may get from having increased media coverage. There will be cases when engaging with the media may be too risky.

It pays well to be proactive and creative when engaging the media. Don't just respond to 'issue' situations, invite the press to local events, arrange a photo call, send out press releases and build up relationships with local reporters. If you've got a story to tell, be proactive in getting coverage!

As your campaign develops, you may be contacted by the media for comment on a particular development or issue. If you are approached for comment, try to find some time to write down three key messages that you want to get across in your coverage. This will help keep you on topic (even if the interviewer doesn't!)

Finally, don't forget that media is incredibly diverse! Don't just think about engaging the national press; what about your regional and local papers, radio and TV? What about social media and online platforms? Be creative in how you spread the word!



Quick Tip! If you're an avid Tweeter, Twitter is a great platform to engage journalists from all across the globe. Follow the reporters from your local press and other journalists who are interested in the issues connected to your campaign. You can tweet them directly for coverage or even ask them to retweet something you've already written!

Want any further advice or inspiration? Don't forget to check out the rest of our resources on our website:

www.regionalasylumactivism.org

For further information, please contact your Local Regional Asylum Activism Co-ordinator
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