

Guide to Contacting your Member of Parliament

The idea of contacting or visiting a Member of Parliament can seem daunting. Yet with some simple preparation, it can be a powerful experience and one of the most effective ways to motivate, support and hold our elected representatives accountable.

In many cases the issue you are contacting your Member of Parliament about will be the responsibility of a Minister, Shadow Minister or spokesperson. This shouldn't dissuade you from contacting your local representative. If they don't hear from passionate people in their electorate, it's easy for them to get cynical, or assume their electorate doesn't care about important issues, in which case they won't speak up in Parliament or the party room.

There are many ways to contact a Member of Parliament, each with different levels of impact and effort required. This guide will give you some tips on engaging your MP through letters and emails, social media, phone calls and visits. Regardless of the way you contact a Member of Parliament, to get the most impact from your engagement we encourage you to follow these four simple tips:

Be You! Try not to follow a script if you meet in person or ring the Member of Parliament's office. Change the text of form emails or letters to suit yourself and the Member. Parliamentarians seek election because they enjoy representing people, so if you can show that you are unique while caring about a broader issue, the Member of Parliament is far more likely to engage with you.

Be Cool! We may not agree with some of our elected representatives but always remember that we are there to change a Member of Parliament's mind and heart. Many representatives are willing to change their position on issues so make sure the Member knows that you are there to help them make the right decision.

Be Brief! Federal Members of Parliament represent approximately 100,000 people. They also may hold a Ministerial position, be a member of many committees and have Parliamentary duty. This leads to an often frantic life with little time for family and friends. To make sure the Member of Parliament is able to understand the issue, clearly state the topic clearly you are looking to discuss and summarise the action you would like the Parliamentarian to take.

Be Knowledgeable! It is difficult for a Member of Parliament to be across every issue. They rely heavily on their staff, department representatives and advocates like yourself. You don't need to know every aspect of every issue, but if you can provide some fundamental examples you are more likely to convince your Member of Parliament. Also, be knowledgeable about the Member of Parliament you are engaging. Find out not only where the Member represents and which party they are from, but also if they have said anything positive or negative in the past about the issue you are engaging with.

With these four tips in mind it is now time to decide who to contact and the type of contact you want to have with a Member of Parliament.

Which Member of Parliament and what is the best method of contact?

The most powerful type of contact for Parliamentarians is when local residents from the electorate they represent meet face-to-face with them. If you are visiting as a church, school or university group try to meet with the Member of Parliament that represents your area. If you are unsure of which Member represents you there are links available below. You can also request meetings or contact with Ministers in relation to specific matters which they are responsible for. Ministerial meetings, however, are more difficult to secure than meetings with Members in their electorate due to Ministers having responsibility for an entire department or portfolio.

The most powerful engagement is to meet directly with your local representative. Not everyone is able to do this due to time, so a quick phone call to a Member of Parliament's electorate office can have a similar impact. Be aware though it is unlikely you will get to speak to the Member directly and would usually speak to their staff.

The next level of impact is letters. Personal, hand-written letters in particular are very powerful. Many members of Parliament are now on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. While not as powerful as a written letter or a meeting, this type of engagement that is non-aggressive but from a local resident can have a high impact. The lowest level of impact is an email to your local member, but this can be boosted significantly if it is tailored and personal. While it is seen by many Members as the least powerful means of contact it is still better than no action at all!

Emails and Letters

A brief one-page letter about a single issue can be very powerful coming from residents of the Member of Parliament's electorate. To write the letter and make sure it has the highest level of impact you should:

- Include your name and address
- Handwrite or type and sign the letter
- Personalise the letter in your own words
- Clearly state the topic and the action you are asking the Member of Parliament to consider
- Request a response or ask a question that requires an answer

Social Media

A quick Tweet or Facebook comment can let your local member know that you care about an issue. Make sure you identify yourself as a resident of the Member's electorate and make the comment polite and brief. Ask for a specific action from the Member of Parliament and do not engage in any fights that can escalate into a flame war with other social media advocates or users.

Phone Calls

Before phoning your Member of Parliament make sure you are able to express your comments briefly on the matter you wish to discuss. Give your name and the town or suburb where you live in the Member of Parliament's electorate. Don't be disheartened if you cannot speak to the Member of Parliament directly, just ask to speak to a staff member

who can take your concern to the Member. Ask for a concrete action and for the staff member to inform you of the outcome. If you are informed that the matter is not an area that the Member is responsible for, tell the staff that you want your local representative to not only be aware of your concerns but to also raise the matter with the responsible Minister on your behalf. You may be asked to put the matter in writing either in a letter or email.

Visits

Visiting a Member of Parliament requires more organisation than other methods of contact but it can be very influential and can lead to positive lasting relationships with the Member.

Making an appointment and what to expect

To make an appointment simply call the electorate office of your local Member of Parliament and explain that you'd like to meet with your local Member. The staff member who receives your call may ask you what you want to see the Member about, where you're from and who will be attending the meeting. A 15-30 minute time slot will normally be set aside for your meeting at a time convenient for yourself and the Member of Parliament. This is usually on Monday to Friday, however some Members of Parliament regularly have 'village visits' or 'mobile office' days. It is a good idea to ask if the Member has one coming up in your area.

Your politician will expect your group to ask for something and will assume that the 'ask' is the point of your visit. Politicians are elected to Parliament to represent their constituents, so meeting with members of their electorate, listening to their concerns, and taking action on their behalf is a normal part of a politician's life.

Group sizes

When visiting your Member there is really no set size that groups should be, but three to five people is a good number. Make sure everyone knows who will lead the conversation and that someone takes notes. It is not necessary to record everything that is said but it is important to note briefly what the group asks for, outline the Member's response, record what the Member agrees to do and anything else the group agrees to do as follow up.

The meeting

At the start of the meeting, you should use the politician's title (Mr/Ms/Mrs/Dr) or "Senator/Minister" and surname. If invited to, you may subsequently use their first name.

When visiting your Member it is good to think of your time as divided into four slots:

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

In a half hour visit you could expect welcome and wrapping up slots to take around five minutes each, leaving you ten minutes to make your case and ten minutes for discussion.

What to say

Making the case – Prepare an outline on what you want to talk about, what actions you want the Member of Parliament to take and take any briefing sheets for yourself and the Member. One person should be designated to make the case and request action from the Member. Try to make any engagement as personal as possible. Let the Member know that you live in their electorate and are looking for them to represent your interests.

Discussion – After presenting the case, ask if the Member of Parliament has any questions and allow a free flowing discussion on the topic. Avoid contradicting each other, or talking over the top of your Member of Parliament. If the Member seems to be getting off-topic, gently bring them back to the topic at hand.

Wrapping Up – When your time has come to a close, thank the Member for meeting with you, thank the staff for facilitating or sitting in on the meeting and confirm what you and your MP have each agreed to do.

Follow Up – One person should assume responsibility to follow up after the visit. This involves writing a letter of thanks to the Member for meeting with the group. As well as saying thank you, the letter should remind the Member of the topic of discussion and what the Member and the group each agreed to do. If your group has promised to track down and send on any material you should include this with the letter.

Links

Electorate and MP name:

Find out what electorate you live in and who your local MP is:

<http://apps.aec.gov.au/eseach/>

Federal Member of Parliament Details:

Find your MP and Senator contact details: http://www.aph.gov.au/Senators_and_Members

How to address Senators and Members:

http://www.aph.gov.au/senators_and_members/guidelines_for_contacting_senators_and_members/how_to_address_senators_and_members

State Member of Parliament Details:

ACT <http://www.parliament.act.gov.au/members/current>

NT <http://www.nt.gov.au/lant/members-of-parliament/members-of-parliament.shtml>

NSW <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/members>

VIC <http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/members/>

QLD <http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/members>

WA <http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/parliament/memblast.nsf/WAllMembers>

TAS <http://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/Parliament/GeneralContacts.htm>

You can also contact local Councillors and Mayors from your Council regarding many issues. The Council system varies from state to state, if you have any questions about contacting Councillors please contact us and we'll be happy to help you out.

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