Local Trust
trusting
local
people

Working with your MP

A GUIDE FOR COMMUNITIES







MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT ARE THERE TO REPRESENT US – THAT'S THEIR JOB.

But it's also up to us to make sure they are aware of the issues that matter to our communities. The knowledge and confidence to do this effectively is a valuable skill for every citizen to develop.

Knowing your MP is there to support you can be useful in lots of different circumstances – whether it's asking them to attend an event in your area to help publicise it, offer advice and support on an issue your area is facing or raise an issue on your behalf.

Across the country, Big Local partnerships offer insight into how communities can engage with their MPs. We know many have a good relationship with their local MP, but nearly half haven't engaged with theirs at all.

This toolkit gives an overview of some of the ways that you can engage with your local MP and provides real life examples of how different community groups have worked with theirs, it's divided into three sections:

1 Tips for working with your MP

2 Community voices: how we worked with our MP

3 Getting started

About Big Local

Big Local is a resident-led funding programme providing people in 150 areas in England with £1.15m each to spend across 10 – 15 years, to create lasting change in their neighbourhoods.

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH YOUR MP

Contacting your MP might feel like a daunting process, but it doesn't have to be. There are several different ways you can get started – here we introduce some of the reasons you might want to reach out and what you can expect.



Why should I reach out to my MP?

Engaging with your local MP can be useful for supporting the work that you are doing in your community. It can help to build a profile for a project, cause or issue your working on and support you in your endeavor to make a difference.



Where do I start?

Getting in direct contact with your MP is the best way to build a lasting relationship with them. Regular contact will enable you and your community (their constituents) to not only get greater publicity and support with work that you are doing in your area but will also enable you to inform and influence decisions that widely affect communities.

Few people ever contact their MP; only a handful write letters or go to meet them in person. So, imagine the impact that community groups speaking from direct experience about the challenges communities face could have on an MP's work.

What can my MP help with?

Start by letting your MP know about your work. Most communities begin contact with their MP by dropping their office an email or letter to inform them about their work. Make them aware of the work you are doing in the local area, this may turn into a meeting, or an MP sharing information with others.

1 Support to attract publicity and interest in your work

Having an MP on board can be key to spreading the word about what you are doing in the local area, what it means to residents, and potentially can help to secure new volunteers, resources and partners. This can be anything from asking your MP to publicise a scheme, project or event that you are holding, to requesting public support for your work that can be included in an article in the local newspaper. In many cases, Big Local areas have invited their local MP to a community event, or the opening of a community centre, and encouraged the MP to share information about Big Local projects and spaces with their constituents on their website and social media.

2 Work together to tackle issues in the area

If a major issue is getting in the way of your project moving forward or getting off the ground, you can call on your MP for support. If they can help you, they will. This mainly includes matters which parliament or central government departments are responsible for, but they can also show their support when issues arise that are related to other public and private bodies.

3 Support for campaigns that are important to you and your area

You can also engage with your MP to encourage them to support a local or national campaign that you are passionate about. A good starting point is finding out what your MP has been saying about the topic, whether they have been involved in any similar campaigns and see if this might be something they would support.

When you are confident about how you are going to make the campaign appealing to them, get in touch, but remember to link it back to your experiences as a member of the community and why it is important to you. If they feel they can offer support, they may be able to help gain publicity for the campaign and introduce you to other organisations that might be interested.

Top Tip

Don't be put off by political allegiance. Constituency work is not party political, so it doesn't matter whether or not you voted for your MP.

What can your MP do to support your work?

If your community is facing an issue that is stalling a project or event, your MP can help raise it for you with the relevant government department. In most cases, your MP will send a letter to the relevant department or official to try and find a solution. Your MP might also decide to take matters a stage further by writing to the minister involved.

In issues relating to other private and public bodies, your MP can also raise the issue on your behalf and give you advice on how to take the matter further. In many cases, your MP can help to follow up a certain case and potentially speed up a decision or outcome.

If the MP feels like there is something to be gained by making the matter public, they may also help to raise the profile of an issue by prompting debates and asking questions in parliament. This can help get more awareness and coverage, which can persuade other influential people to offer their support and get the matter resolved.

Although MPs can help to solve many problems faced by constituents and their communities, there is not always an easy solution. And while an MP can be a great person to have on your side, it is also important to invest in relationships with other influential local people to make sure you have plenty of sources of support.



Local campaigns are place-specific and about tackling issues in your local area. A local campaign could be about getting support to prevent the closure of a community centre, advocating for better transport links or even a better say for residents in how the neighbourhood is run.

National campaigns are UK-wide and involve making links between national challenges and issues your community may be facing. These tend to be more general, such as demands for better action on climate change or greater investment in national mental health services.



Finding the right time

Timing can be crucial to getting a positive response from an MP as they have busy calendars, so it is often a good idea to take advantage of what is happening – both in their diaries and in communities – at different times of the year.

AFTER AN ELECTION

If the MP is new to the area they'll be looking to engage and make connections with constituents, so it's a good time to get your name out there. Even if they were your existing MP this can still be an opportune time to get in touch, as they try to re-connect with their constituent base and set out to work on the promises made in their election manifesto.

INVITE YOUR LOCAL MP TO A COMMUNITY EVENT, THE OPENING OF A HUB OR LARGE PROJECT

This provides an opportunity to showcase the work your area is doing and is an opportunity for your MP to engage with a wide range of people.

WHEN YOUR MP MAKES A PUBLIC STATEMENT THAT IS RELATED TO AN ISSUE YOUR AREA CARES ABOUT

This a great time to highlight why it matters to you and how it relates to the work that you are doing in the local area. You could use their statement to encourage them to support a project and suggest different forms of action and approaches to resolve it, based upon your experiences of community action.

INVITE YOUR LOCAL MP TO AN ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING (AGM)

This will help them become familiar with people involved in your projects and the different roles they play within the area.

CREATE A SPACE AT A MEETING FOR THE MP TO JOIN

Even if it's just for 10-15 minutes and not the full meeting, this can be a great way to get your MP involved. It can give them a sense of the work you are doing and your ambition and ideas, and an opportunity to focus on the specific issue or project that you'd like their support on.

TOP TIP

Your MP will likely need a lot of notice to attend an event, take your call, respond to your email and support your project, so make sure to give them plenty of time when you send an invitation.

Getting in touch

There are many ways you can engage with your MP, such as writing a letter, phoning, emailing or connecting on social media. Often, the most effective form of engagement is a face-to-face meeting.



A meeting may seem daunting at first, but it's worth it for the increased likelihood of making a big impact; to a busy MP with a full inbox, one good meeting can be more memorable than a hundred e-mails. To arrange a meeting, either call their office in your area or visit their website, find out who to contact on their behalf and send them an e-mail requesting an appointment.

When asking for an appointment, you should explain:

- **what your project or organisation is and where it is based – explain that you are residents of the group in an area based in the MP's constituency**
- **why you would like to meet with or speak to the MP**
- **who will be coming to the meeting and what you hope to achieve**
- **when you are available for the meeting.**

If your MP does not get back to you it might be worth making a call to their office. This can be beneficial because you will get to speak directly to the MP's office or even the MP themselves.

Surgery drop-ins

MPs hold a surgery drop-in once a week, but sometimes you will need to make an appointment, so check their website or phone the office before you go along.

Things to think about before your meeting

1 How will you get your MP on board?

You don't need to be an expert to meet your MP, but a well-thought-out approach can make all the difference in getting them on board to support what matters most to your community. You and your MP may not see eye to eye on everything, but it's better to focus on finding common ground rather than starting with the areas of disagreement.



2 What is your MP interested in?

Google your MP, visit their website or theyworkforyou.com to find out if they're already interested in any issues related to the work that your community is doing. This could be anything from housing and health to welfare and transport. Take note, check it is relevant to the topic of your meeting and, if so, use it as an opportunity to show your organisation has been tackling similar challenges at the local level.



3 What key message are you trying to share?

Prepare a set of points that you want to make sure you get across. These could be facts about the work that your organisation is doing in your area, the background to a particular situation or problem that you would like help with, or key information about a campaign that is important to you and your community. No matter what it is, being clear about the main message that you want to share is more likely to get your MP on board.



At the meeting

BE CONFIDENT AND CONCISE

You may find you are more knowledgeable about a topic than they are; MPs have a wide range of to investigate as part of their job so don't assume they are informed about your issue. Make sure to give them an introduction about your work and how it impacts your local area. Be specific, and give them a chance to ask questions. If the MP is familiar with the issue, you can give a brief overview and jump ahead to the key details.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Nobody knows your neighbourhood like you do; speak in your own words and use your expert local knowledge to engage your MP on the realities faced by their constituents. Facts and figures can add depth and context to what you are saying, but personal stories and illustrations are what will give them real insight into your work.

ENCOURAGE OTHERS

If you are part of a group chatting to your MP, encourage everybody to speak to ensure everyone's views are heard.

LEAD WITH WHAT YOU KNOW

Explain what the work you are doing means for residents like yourself in your area. How has it led to you being in the room today? What is your ambition for your area and how do your current activities and projects fit into that? Is there a bump in the road that is preventing you from achieving your ambitions, and what do you know from your work within the community about how this could be resolved?

BE HONEST

If they ask a question you don't know the answer to, that's fine – nobody is an expert in everything! Be as responsive as you can, but remember that you can always get back to them with specific answers after the meeting.

BE CLEAR ABOUT YOUR 'ASK'

A good conversation will get you far, but it is important where possible to get clear commitments before you leave. Work out beforehand what you will be asking your MP to do and plan to finish your visit or phone call by informing the MP how you would like to follow up on the issue. Don't be afraid to ask; acting on behalf of their constituents is an important part of a politician's role.

Remember to follow up

Make an effort to follow up with information and activities that may be of interest to them.

Suggest regular catchups with the MP or their office, either related to your 'ask' or more generally about the work that you are doing. This will help build your initial meeting into a longer-term relationship.

If you have one, send them your newsletter to keep them up to date on key projects and events (and if you don't, consider putting one together).



Top Tip

Consider writing up and sharing an outline of what was discussed for colleagues, especially in the run-up to future meetings. This way, your conversations will be consistent no matter who is able to attend meetings.

COMMUNITY VOICES:
HOW WE WORKED WITH OUR MP

We talked to Big Local partnerships about how they've worked with their local MP. They had different experiences and reasons for doing so, but they all had top tips to share with others looking to do the same.



Goldthorpe & Bolton-on-Dearne:
SUPPORT WITH PUBLICITY FOR A LOCAL HOUSING PROJECT

The local MP for Goldthorpe & Bolton-on-Dearne Big Local is John Healey MP of the Labour party, who was first elected in 1997 to the constituency of Wentworth and Dearne in Barnsley.

John has been involved with the Big Local partnership since 2012, initially writing a piece welcoming the £1m to the area. Big Local often send him invitations to key dates in the community calendar, and he has attended many events and even opened the community's Arts Festival in 2017.

April, who works at Goldthorpe & Bolton-on-Dearne Big Local, is in charge of making sure they have consistent and ongoing communication with his office, sending emails or attending the constituency surgery on a regular basis. In most cases, communication is initiated when they have a specific request, often based on a project. This means that the relationship is often issue-specific, but having an MP onside offers wider reassurance that support is on-hand if it is needed in the future.

Having a strong relationship with John Healey MP has aided Goldthorpe & Bolton-on-Dearne Big Local on one big issue of importance to them and their area: problems related to their housing project. This issue led the community to reach out to Healey because his previous role in the shadow cabinet as shadow housing secretary made them confident that he would be willing and able to help. He was able to offer support in a number of ways: making a public statement to help them to get publicity for the project, as well as convincing the council to overturn a decision that allowed them to get council tax exemption on properties while they were empty.



Goldthorpe & Bolton-on-Dearne's
TOP TIP

Get your MP on board with your projects

Getting the support of people with influence, like an MP for major projects, is really valuable. At times, MPs can have a lot of impact because of their public platform, but you need to keep them informed so that you are in a good place to ask for their support if problems come up. When you find yourselves with a problem, or face unexpected delays during a project, having your MP aware of what is going on can be really helpful, and sometimes can keep the ball rolling.

Arches Big Local:
GROWING A STRONG RELATIONSHIP OVER TIME

Arches Big Local has two MPs; one half of the area is in Chatham and Aylesford, represented by Conservative MP Tracey Crouch, the other half is in Rochester and Strood, which is represented by Conservative MP Kelly Tolhurst.

Arches Big Local formed their relationships with each MP by just asking for a meeting. They were not about asking them to do anything in particular, but rather a chance to introduce themselves and their work. This enabled the MPs to gravitate towards Big Local plans and activities that were of interest to them since their first meetings, their relationships have grown stronger year on year.

These meetings are now regular and both MPs often reach out to get an update on Big Local projects. As Kelly Tolhurst MP now holds the position of parliamentary under-secretary in the Department of Transport (since February 2020), she has been very supportive of Arches when they faced issues related to transport.

A recent example is Arches' plans for the refurbishment of Luton Arches, which act as an important centrepiece in the neighbourhood. There had been disagreement between Network Rail and the local authority as to whether the project would be able to go ahead. Kelly's support helped to secure agreement between the different actors involved that the work would be carried out safely, and now the plans for refurbishment are in full swing.

Arches Big Local have taken time to develop a level of trust and understanding, so both MPs are happy to mention Arches in conversations with third parties, which often has positive impacts on the work they are doing. For example, Arches had discussed urban greening with Tracey Crouch MP, meaning that when meetings and events related to the topic are held, she invites the group to attend.

Arches were welcomed into a conversation she was having about increasing green space in the local urban environment by installing cladding on walls so shrubs can be planted, known as 'green walls'. This enabled the local school to get a green wall at almost no cost.

Arches'
TOP TIP

Develop good personal relationships, but manage your expectations

Arches found that once they had a good relationship with their MPs, they were able to have more personal conversations and connect over different experiences and perspectives from working in the area leading to support that may not have been possible at first.

They found there are times when their MPs are able to have conversations with local authorities, the private sector and other external organisations to get the ball rolling on projects. But there are other times where they will not be able to offer their support, for a variety of reasons – not least that they are often very busy! This is why it is important to maintain engagement with a wide range of stakeholders on different levels, so you have backup when your local area needs support.

Warwick Ahead Big Local:
SUPPORT WITH GETTING STAKEHOLDERS ON BOARD

Warwick Ahead Big Local is on the Warwick Estate in the constituency of Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford, represented by Labour's Yvette Cooper MP.

Warwick Ahead first got in contact with Yvette Cooper through local connections, as Hazel, a member of the partnership and chair of the Neighbourhood Watch, was already in contact with her office. This trusted relationship between Yvette and Hazel has been built upon by their community group, but they have kept Hazel as the primary contact to ensure consistency.

Warwick Ahead often contact Yvette when a specific issue arises. They invite her to a meeting so that a full discussion of the matter takes place, giving space for her to be able to offer her advice and suggest potential support that she might be able to offer. As the relationship has grown, Yvette has initiated contact directly to check in with what the group is doing, either by picking up the phone or dropping by to meet in person.

Recently, Yvette was able to offer support when residents came across challenges setting up their community hub. In November 2019, Warwick Ahead were granted the use of a community shop owned by the local housing association, Wakefield and District Housing Limited, and planned to manage and run their local activities from there. However, the housing association were slow to issue licenses that would enable them to carry out essential refurbishments, such as permits for putting in a disabled toilet. This cost them time and money, as they continued to pay rent on the space even though it was not in good working condition for any of their proposed activities.

Following her attendance at a partnership meeting, Yvette Cooper MP showed her public support for the refurbishment plans and used her platform to coordinate with key stakeholders. This moved the issue along; the license has now been signed, work has been able to begin, and the community space should be in use soon.



Warwick Ahead's TOP TIP

Take time to develop a level of trust and understanding

Trust and understanding take time to develop, but often they can be built through honest and regular communication. Like any relationship it must be a two-way street and showing integrity and consistency in communications will help MPs trust you to get things done.

David Craig, chair of Warwick Ahead Big Local, says that their trusting and understanding relationship with their MP is built on being upfront on both sides:

"Because of the relationship, we feel we can approach her and get an honest response as to whether she will be able to help us get where we want."

GETTING STARTED

This section includes some practical things to think about when you make that initial contact with your MP. We've created short templates to help you put together a punchy and professional introduction that will get your MP's attention.



WRITING TO YOUR MP

One of the most effective ways to engage your MP is to write them an email and/or a hard copy letter. As one of their constituents, you should receive a reply. A letter is a tried and tested way to effectively raise an issue or make your MP aware of what you are doing.

Ask yourself the following questions before writing your letter:

1. **What do you want the MP to do? For example, lobby on an issue, help you achieve something, or come to a meeting.**
2. **Why do you care about this issue, and why do you want their help?**
3. **What are the local benefits?**

By letter or email

Use the template letter below to get you started but remember that personalising your letter as much as possible is always a good idea.

Dear [XXX],

I hope this finds you well.

[Outline in a sentence the reason why you're writing]

As my MP, I'm writing to ask you…

[Say why this is important to you/in your community/what you are planning on doing]

For example: We have been working to improve housing in the area, which as you will know is very old and many residents struggle with rent. We have put forward proposals to establish a co-housing project which would create 40 new affordable homes and improve social cohesion in the community.

[What is the problem?]

For example: We are currently in the process of purchasing some land from the council, although we have been struggling to get them to engage properly in the process as they say they are too busy with other things.

[How can the MP help you to solve this problem?]

For example: We would really appreciate your support with our proposals and, if possible, your help arranging a meeting with the council so that we can buy the land and begin the process of building the homes.

[Do your research to see if your MP has been supportive of similar issues].

For example: I know you have also been fighting to...

Thank you for your time. We look forward to hearing from you in due course.

Yours sincerely,

<Name> <Address>

Once you've sent your letter or email, follow up on the phone to request a meeting to discuss the issue in person. When you're asking for a meeting, the key thing is to keep it personal. MPs and their staff are people too!

Through social media

If you don't have time to write a letter, consider contacting your MP through social media. Lots of MPs use Twitter, and it can be a great way of getting a quick response. However; make sure to check out their bio first to see whether they take enquiries via social media– some specifically say that they don't, but often provide more details on how to get in touch.

For example: "Hi @name, as my MP can you help us by [XXX]?"

or

"Hi @name, as our MP, we wanted to invite you to [XXX]. Come join us and see communities in action"

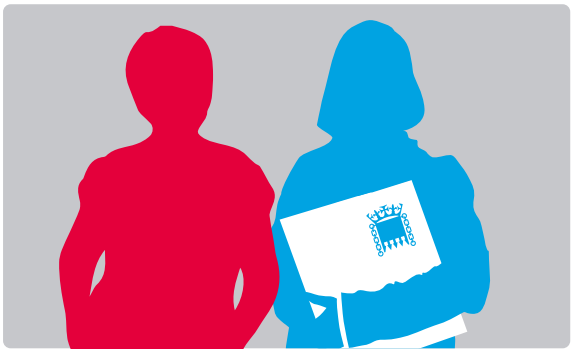
Promote your MPs support

If your MP is supportive of your work and you're thinking of promoting your project in the media, ask your MP for a quote to include in your press release to show their support publicly.

A little bit extra

Managed to get a meeting? If your MP seems on board, try asking for a photo of you together at the end of the meeting, and let them know you'll post about their support. Remember to mention them or their office using their handle, so they see (and hopefully share) your post.

For example:



Great to speak to [MP name] today and discuss [XXX] in [local area]. Thanks for your support @[MP handle]!

JUST THE BEGINNING

This toolkit is designed to help you draw attention to the things that matter to you, in your community. Whether you're looking at local issues or national campaigns, remember that using your voice and using your community's power can make a lasting difference.

If you've found this toolkit useful, share it with someone else who might too!

SHARE IT



About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live. We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

localtrust.org.uk

@LocalTrust

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-ncsa/4.0/

creative commons

Local Trust

CAN Mezzanine | 7-14 Great Dover Street | London SE1 4YR | General enquiries 020 3588 0565
Registered in England and Wales | Charity number 1147511 | Company number 07833396

COMMUNITY FUND