

Lobbying politicians

Lobbying is the practice of private advocacy with the goal of influencing a governing body, in order to ensure that an individual's or organisation's point of view is represented in the government. A lobbyist is a person who is paid to influence legislation as well as public opinion. However, any interested person or community group can lobby local councillors or parliamentarians if they know how to do it effectively. Here are some steps to get you started.

Know your objectives: Be clear about what you want the politicians to do. Some possible requests are:

- Make a public statement.
- Raise the issue in parliament. In this case you might ask the politician to send you a copy of the Hansard report of the statement.
- Write to, or speak to, the relevant minister on your behalf.
- Lobby party colleagues.
- Raise the issue in the party room.
- Get the issue referred to a parliamentary committee.

Know the issues: Know the relevant facts and figures. Be clear in your mind what the issue is about, and stick to it. This includes knowing the counter arguments and why they are wrong.

Know the politicians: Read up on the MPs' party policy and assess their capacity for influencing party decisions. Check out media reports on what the MP may have said on the issue in the past and mention these in meetings and letters. (Possible outside links Who's who: Federal: www.aph.gov.au/whoswho/index.htm; Victorian state: www.parliament.vic.gov.au/mps.html)



Write a letter: Sending letters can be an effective way for individuals to communicate their concerns and to request support from those in a position to influence the situation.

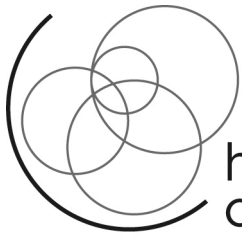
Set up a meeting: Visiting a politician is one of the most powerful things you can do whilst campaigning for human rights. It carries much more weight than signing a petition, sending an e-mail making a phone call or writing a letter.

Attend events: Politicians frequently attend official openings and community events. These can be an opportunity to briefly talk with your local member and raise key issues. Remember, be polite and keep it brief. Many other people will also want to speak to them at these events. This may also be an opportunity to simply introduce yourself to your local member. This can be a good grounding for later meetings and discussions.

Bring up your concerns with political staffers: These people have a direct line to the politician and if they agree with your concerns about your topic's importance, they can relay your message to the politician. It is also the staff who will carry out your requests on behalf of the politician – it is important to keep them informed and have a strong relationship. After a meeting with the politician, keep in touch with your contact on their staff and follow up with them about any actions the politician has agreed to undertake.

Follow up: Make sure they honour their commitments. If you don't hear anything within a reasonable time, phone and write a letter outlining any undertakings they made. When you get positive results, thank them. Invite them to your next function, mention them in your news letter, and tell the press.

Stay in touch: Ideally you will build an ongoing relationship with relevant politicians, so that when you need to contact them in the future they will remember you and will be readily accessible. Aim to keep them updated on your issue of concern. If the politician or their staff are interested, offer to send them your newsletter (if relevant) or regular information to keep them updated about your topic/country. That way, when there is a crisis they will already have background knowledge.



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Keep records: Keep records of all your meetings. You should record the date of the meeting, who was present, the staff contact person, outcomes of the meeting and any other relevant notes. This is important for several reasons. It will help you remember the name of the person (usually the staffer) to contact when you need to talk to the politician and enable you to remind them of the actions they took last time. Also, it ensures advocacy continuity within your organisation: if you leave, the next person will know which politicians have been helpful and what happened. There is nothing more frustrating than duplicating work that has already been done in the past, and it looks unprofessional if you get to a meeting and don't appear to know that your organisation has already contacted this politician in the past.