

Making your lobbying better – Paula Keaveney.

The points below are based on my experience as a local councillor, Parliamentary Candidate, Euro Candidate and Police Commissioner Candidate as well as my work for national charities, including taking part in some lobbying campaigns. The points are also based on my academic research on the lobbying of political candidates, which includes interviews and analysis of the Police and Crime Commissioner elections in 2012. I am happy to give advice (on technique not on messages) by e mail and can be contacted at keavenep@edgehill.ac.uk (Edge Hill University).

Know your market:

Local Councillors (City, County, District)

Local Councillors often have other jobs. This means you need to find ways of contacting them that don't revolve around 9 to 5 meetings.

Local Councillors tend not to have staff who can anticipate their views and reply on their behalf. This can cause delays in replying to some contacts.

Local Councillors have a surprising number of meetings and events to attend. It is not uncommon to have three in an evening (which might be a committee meeting, a community event and a school governors meeting). This means they are forced to prioritise. This means you need to be clear about the value **TO THEM** of your event.

Local Councillors will prioritise their area and their voters. This will affect how you pitch any approach. However the fact that your organisation has a building in my ward is not necessarily relevant if you don't deliver services to my voters.

Some local Councillors have other Council responsibilities, like chairing a committee or being a cabinet member. This can mean that some are more relevant to your cause than others. Council websites will identify all the roles.

Some local Councillors are very influential within their local (or even national) political party. This means some are more worth lobbying than others on broader issues. You can find out who is influential by following them on Twitter or using other media. Politically influential people will tend to talk about going to party conference, working with MPs on policy, tabling motions at party meetings and so on.

Some local Councillors have very limited knowledge of their own political party. It is best not to assume that everyone is up to speed on every policy development.

Most Councils have wards represented by more than one Councillor. These individuals are not always from the same party. This can mean you need to arrange more than one meeting.

People often make mistakes about where power lies. Check carefully where decisions are made, particularly if you are dealing with issues around transport. If you are lobbying a secondary audience, it is best to be clear about that as otherwise you risk looking stupid.

Sources of information include the relevant Council website which should not only list all Councillors but provide information about their roles. It is easy to find out the names of Committee members and a little bit of background about each Councillor. Councillors are obliged to register their "interests" which in this case will include details of employment and any memberships of organisations.

Before lobbying over a Council decision, check whether your Council has an elected mayor. Elected Mayors need to be lobbied in their own right. NB: There is a difference between an elected mayor (political power) and a ceremonial mayor (civic figure).

Members of Parliament

Members of Parliament will be keen to meet any local campaigning groups or anyone speaking on behalf of a local campaign.

They are however very time-pressured.

It is worth looking at an MP's website to see if there are any day-in-the life type articles. These give an idea of the sort of activities that go on.

If you want to lobby the Government, back bench MPs in the Government party are well worth targeting in addition to any ministers you may contact.

You may have to initially deal with MPs staff. It is worth making friends with them as they can often give a good steer as to what will work and what won't. I have heard MPs remark that lobbyists will be nice to them and rude to their staff. This gets you precisely nowhere.

MPs can be written to at the House of Commons or at their Constituency Office. Different MPs prefer different arrangements so it is worth phoning to check. The switchboard at the House of Commons is 0207 219 3000. It is worth being aware that by convention an MP from one Constituency will not take up an issue that only affects another Constituency. Clearly if your issue is Liverpool-wide, you can contact all Liverpool MPs (for example). So be careful about raising hyper local issues with non- local MPs.

When Parliament is sitting, MPs tend to be unavailable locally on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Fridays are a good day to try to book meetings. MPs will also have Constituency surgeries but these are for constituents with problems and I suggest you don't turn up at one of these without

an appointment. A lobby group that keeps a homeless woman waiting while talking about something non-urgent will not impress.

MPs love photo opportunities. So if you have a meeting with an MP, think about how you can turn that into a media opportunity for both sides.

There is a lot of published information available about MPs. The Times Guide to the House of Commons is one of my favourites.

Parliamentary (and other first past the post election) Candidates – which will in the run up to an election also include sitting MPs.

The purpose of being a candidate is to get votes. This means candidates prioritise activities that will do this. Time is always very tight. You need to tailor your pitch in a way that speaks to the perceived self-interest of a candidate while also appearing a good use of time. I would be keen to take part in meetings or activities with local voters or that can help me get media coverage. I would be extremely reluctant to take part in lengthy policy briefings by someone who doesn't even live in the area.

Non MP candidates nearly always have other jobs. Some even continue with these jobs through the whole campaign and only take polling day off work. This means you need to tailor what you do to this fact.

It is difficult to overstate the time and other pressures of being a Parliamentary Candidate. I would often switch on my computer at work to find more than 100 e-mails from constituents, all of which needed a personal answer of some sort. This means it is in your interests to start your lobbying as early as possible. Sending anything in the last two weeks is pretty pointless.

Most candidates will lose. They know this and you know this. You are however lobbying some of them because you want to avoid looking biased while also making links with people who may be influential in the future. Given this, it is worth thinking about what those people will remember of your organisation. In 2010 not a single organisation or organisational rep thanked me for my reply to their enquiry or survey. This left me, a potentially influential person, with a bad impression of some household name charities. I am pleased to report however that in the PCC elections I was impressed at the way I was thanked by Barnardos and by the Howard League.

As a candidate in Garston and Halewood, I would always prioritise a letter from Mrs Smith of L19 over anything sent from the HQ of a national organisation, no matter how deserving the cause. Messages and contacts are always best delivered by local people.

Candidates you are lobbying are your potential customers. This means however much you dislike their political party, you need to be polite. It also means you need to assume noble motives even if you are cynical. Several of those who e mailed me in 2012 included a demand to “answer honestly”. This is verging on the rude and did not leave me with a good impression of their intentions or of the organisation they were acting for.

Know your timing:

If your lobbying revolves around a Parliamentary Bill, check the timing of the various stages. This information is at www.parliament.uk. On the whole, the nearer the actual decision, the less the chance to get change.

Immediately before an election is a bad time to lobby.

With fixed term elections for the UK Parliament as well as for elected mayors, Police and Crime Commissioners, MEPs, MSPs, AMs and local Councillors, it is easy to plan ahead.

The period between six months and one month before an election is an ideal time slot for much of this work if you seek to influence candidates, including those who are already elected but who will be defending seats.

Know who to contact:

Details of current incumbents can be found on official websites.

Details of Parliamentary candidates are usually found on party websites. Most parties will have an office dedicated to the processes around candidate selection and who can be phoned with queries.

Other lobbying audiences

Don't forget MEPs and devolved Parliaments and Assemblies (depending on where you are)

Don't forget the wider political family. Party activists who attend conferences are often highly influential within their own party's policy-making process. They are also often people who have more than one role. A party conference has the added attraction of providing a ready made audience. Lobbying activities at party conferences can include stalls and fringe meetings.

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