

# How to influence the political process.



Oxfam's campaigns target the people who decide on the policies that affect the lives of poor people. Typically these will be governments, international institutions (for example, the G8), or multinational companies. Local campaigners rarely have direct access to these decision-makers, but you do have ways to influence them.

## You can be that change

Local campaigners often have access to influential people, such as MPs and MEPs, as well as local members of political parties, local councillors, trades unionists and local managers of national or multinational companies. Depending on the particular issue, any of these could help to influence the way policies are shaped at national or even international level.

Do you realise how powerful you are as an active campaigner? By uniting with others, you can push world leaders in the right direction. And let's face it, they often need a shove to get them moving. Elected politicians in the UK can have a massive influence on redressing global inequality and poverty, and the best way you can influence them is by talking to your own MP.

## Working with MPs

You can find out who your MP is by visiting [www.theyworkforyou.com](http://www.theyworkforyou.com) or [www.writetothem.com](http://www.writetothem.com)

The latter allows you to contact your MP, local Councillors and MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) through the website. Be aware, however, that a personal letter will have more impact.

The most obvious way to persuade an MP to support a campaign is to meet or write to them, explaining calmly and rationally why you believe a particular policy is necessary to combat poverty. Local media coverage will always be useful in persuading an MP that an issue is worth bothering about. Ideally, you are trying to build a partnership with MPs and other influential people. Do not alienate them by being confrontational or over-demanding.

You don't have to be a political expert – all you need is passion. Your passion is your biggest asset because what you tell them, or write to them about, acts as an indicator for what 'the people' think. Your efforts help build a picture of a constituency that is bothered and concerned. This makes your MP sit up and listen.

## Make it their priority

Writing letters to your MP can be immensely influential. MPs tell us that just 20 individual letters from constituents makes an issue a priority for them. To help you get the most out of your efforts, we'll alert you to the best times to contact your MP on a particular issue.

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## Be creative – get them involved

Why not really capture your MP's imagination by engaging them in some of the events you organise. Show them what it's all about with an invite to a stunt at the local Oxfam shop or a screening of a film; get them along to your next film party; take them a copy of *The Urgency of Now* (a small book about the madness of inequality and poverty) – find ways of involving them however you choose to campaign. Remember, the aim is to show that ordinary people like you – their potential voters – care about these issues.

## Visiting your MP

Your MP may run surgeries on an informal drop-in basis (first-come-first-served), or may expect you to make an appointment. For the informal surgeries, we advise you to turn up as early as possible. Details of surgeries are often advertised in the local press. You can also contact your MP's office directly. The office will advise you on how and when you can meet your MP.

If you haven't met your MP before, introduce yourself as a constituent who has a deep concern about the issue – a concern shown by your support of organisations such as Oxfam.

Your MP will not expect you to have the same level of understanding and knowledge as a policy specialist. You simply need to convey your concern about the issue, and the need for the MP to take action.

It is a good idea to write a follow-up letter to thank your MP for his or her time, state what you understood to be the outcomes of the meeting, and remind the MP of the actions which he or she agreed to take on your behalf.

Whatever activity you are planning, it helps to have the local media on your side. They can help you spread your message and engage support. The greater the publicity, the greater the chance there is of more people becoming involved. There are many potential opportunities: news stories, features and in-depth interviews, letters to the editor, phone-ins, photo stories and filming opportunities.

### Influencing your MP: top tips

- 1. Be yourself. It's you they want to listen to.**
- 2. Always ask them for something that demonstrates their support. Ask them for a signature, to take a stand, be photographed etc.**
- 3. Be short and sweet. Keep letters to one page maximum.**
- 4. Become your MP's constituency assistant's best friend – they control the diary. Be clear about what you want the MP to do and when.**
- 5. Do some homework. At [www.theyworkforyou.com](http://www.theyworkforyou.com) you can enter your postcode and get all the info you need about your MP, their areas of interest and their contact details.**
- 6. Put your new skills to the test by following our latest guide on how to change the world through politics**

### Working with your MP

MPs are always keen to get positive media coverage, but rarely have much time to spare, so it is best to find a way for them to express their support publicly without having to spend a long time doing it. Regional Oxfam campaigns staff often already have good relationships with supportive MPs, in which case it's worth informing them of any contact you are planning.

Here are two examples of campaigners working with their MP:

1. A local Oxfam campaigner persuaded her MP to attend a joint event: the opening of a book department in an Oxfam shop and local lobby for the Trade Justice Movement. The MP was happy to be associated with both the shop and the campaign, and had his picture taken with campaigners outside the shop. The MP found it easy to support the campaign because the event was positive and locally significant.
2. An Oxfam group co-ordinator arranged to do a public interview with a local and supportive MP about the failure of the G8 to tackle poverty. The event was a success and, crucially, local television, radio and newspapers covered the interview. This greatly increased the number of people that the message reached, thus making it an event other influential politicians would take note of. Because the MP gained plenty of good media coverage, it strengthened her relationship with Oxfam.

## Scotland and Wales

If you live in Scotland or Wales then you can also target Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) or Welsh Assembly Members (AMs). Since the Parliament and Assembly were established Oxfam campaigns have persuaded them to support our priorities. In 2009 the Scottish Parliament passed an ambitious Climate Act, which helped force the pace of emissions reduction policy across the UK. Campaigning in Wales has seen the Assembly support the successful campaign for Wales to become the world's first Fair Trade Nation.

Treat your MSPs and AMs as you would your MP – but remember that the devolved governments have power over different areas than the UK Government. Contact the Oxfam Scotland or Oxfam Cymru offices for advice on current campaigns. Find your MSPs and AMs through [www.writetothem.com](http://www.writetothem.com)



*Liberal Democrat MP for Chippenham, Duncan Hames, posts his vote for the Robin Hood Tax for the Bradford-on-Avon Oxfam group just before the 2010 general election.*