

HOW TO MEET WITH YOUR MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT



Guidelines for lobbying MPs, Ministers and senior government officials.

Pressure for change in the policy of indefinite mandatory detention of asylum seekers has to come from the grass roots. ChilOut encourages you to go and visit your member of parliament with your concerns. This pamphlet is designed to make the process easy for you and allow you to give us vital feedback from any meetings.

Seeing a senior government official or your local MP in a formal meeting may seem difficult for the first time. Following these simple points will help you make the most of your meeting.

Most importantly:

Be yourself and believe in what you are doing.

You are an expert on your issue and your organisation. If you have to go to Parliament House or an impressive office, do not be intimidated by the surroundings. These buildings are simply offices not really much different from the offices you know at home.

Preparation:

Clothes.

Do not wear clothing which attracts attention to itself and gets in the way of your real message. You have only a short time with your local Member or the official and there is no time for distractions. Wear something in which you feel comfortable, but which is appropriate to the surroundings.

Numbers.

At least two and no more than three is best for most occasions. More than three makes communication difficult. Two people allows for you to agree on what took place; for one person to watch and feel the non-verbal communication; for each of you to have time to think while the other is speaking and, if you feel the need to keep a record, it allows for one person to take notes.

Research.

Familiarise yourself with the basic definitions of asylum seekers and refugees. Be aware of the common prejudices you may need to counter. The Facts versus Myths page on the ChilOut web site can help you here.

What to take.

Photographs, diagrams, simple graphs can speak louder than words and a basic lobby document is a very good idea. However, it must be simple and short. Do not presume the person will know all about the issue and do not try to talk about too many ideas. The document should be no more than one or two A4 pages, clearly set out, stating what the issue is, the arguments being put forward, and your position on those arguments. It must contain the specific request you are making. If you are not involved in a particular issue already visit the ChilOut website to view our current campaigns. Alternatively, contact ChilOut directly to see what is topical.

You may provide detailed documents at the meeting or in advance. However, in most cases these are not read by the person you are seeing. They may be used by staffers or the Department.

When you get there:

The interview.

Ideally, you want to hear from your Member or the Minister as much as you speak yourself. Listen carefully to what they say. This will give you important clues - where to pitch your information, - how much the person already knows, misunderstandings they have which you need to correct. If you are unsure how to proceed, follow the format of your lobby document, which you can leave with your MP or the Minister at the end of the interview.

Advisers.

A staffer will probably be present. These are very important people for you. They often play a key role in controlling the advice to and from Ministers and MPs and helping with a heavy workload. You should note the name of the adviser, make sure that you keep them informed in the future and, if possible, develop a working relationship with them.

Be clear, pleasant and professional.

Be yourself. Make your points simply and clearly. Do not get into an argument and never let a disagreement become personal. Stick to policy issues, but be firmly dignified if the MP or Minister becomes difficult. You never know when you may have to work with this person again.

Remember to:

Listen for what they will do.

Listen very carefully to what the person agrees to do. Often MPs and Ministers make statements that sound agreeable, but which really have no substance. If this is happening, you might like to try diplomatically suggesting some firmer action on their part. An undertaking from your local MP to write to the Minister on your behalf is one action for which you can ask. As soon as the meeting is over, check with your companion that you both agree on what the official has agreed to do.

Keep a united front and do not exceed your mandate.

Always keep a united front with your partner. Do not give the official the opportunity to see any disagreements between you. If he/she wants to get you to agree on behalf of ChilOut to some new proposal, do not exceed your mandate. It is quite proper for you to say that you will take a new idea or proposal back to your organisation for a decision

Finally:

Follow-up.

If some key decisions are made, or if you feel the need for a formal record, you may like to follow up with a letter confirming the outcome of the meeting. Always make sure that anything you promise to do is followed up as quickly as possible!

Please let ChilOut know who you visit and how your meeting went. Send an email to lobbying@chilout.org, go to the ChilOut website and follow the links to the lobbying page, or send a letter to our postal address listed below.

The world of governments is not different from ordinary human relations, about which you already know a great deal. Sometimes the language may be more formal and the settings different, but you already have many of the skills you require from your living experiences. Being able to judge what motivates a person and how they are feeling and reacting are very relevant skills in lobbying.

So, seize the opportunity to go lobbying, if you have the chance! The best way to develop your lobbying skills is to go and do it. So, good lobbying!

Joan Staples
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Children Out Of Detention (ChilOut) is a group of parents and citizens opposed to the mandatory detention of children in Australian immigration detention centres. We are appalled that Australia's treatment of asylum seekers breaches several human rights treaties to which we are a signatory, in particular the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Please visit our website.
Become informed. Become involved.



Send us your contact details via our web site and we will include you in our regular email updates.

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