

Building and maintaining relationships with your MP and other elected representatives

Elected representatives are voted for by the public to represent the views of local people. They hold sway with the local, and sometimes national, decision making process, and are also often seen by members of the public as a first point of call for problems. On both these counts, it is vital to build and maintain a relationship with them.

Who

Elected representatives include:

- MPs;
- MEPs;
- Members of the Welsh Assembly, Northern Ireland Assembly and London Assembly; and
- Members of local councils (County, District, Metropolitan, Borough).

The number of elected representatives in your local area will differ depending on your Local Authority. However, across England and Wales there are over 20,000 elected Councillors (County and District levels) and 646 MPs.

If you don't know who your local MP is please see www.theyworkforyou.com/mp/, and your Local Authority's website will carry information about your local Councillors.

Why

Having been voted in to represent local people, it is essential that elected representatives understand what problems those people are facing. Many elected representatives regard their local advice agencies as a way of keeping their finger on the pulse in respect of this. The number and types of enquiries you deal with over a given time period, as well as details of individual cases (anonymised, of course), can help elected members to see where legislation/ policy is and isn't working. With your help they can then press for the necessary changes: with a good working relationship in place, advice agencies are in the privileged position of being able to share evidence and recommend solutions, to be taken forward by the more influential elected representatives.

Most elected representatives will also hold surgeries of some form or other where local people can discuss their problems. Having a relationship with your elected representatives will ensure that you can refer cases to one another easily, so that local people get the most appropriate help for their situation, quickly and efficiently.

Opportunities and challenges

Having an active dialogue and involved working relationship with your elected representatives opens up many opportunities, but equally it does present challenges.

Opportunities

1. At the time of publishing this guide, the demand for advice services has increased due to the recession as people have encountered problems relating to, debt, redundancy, mortgage repossessions, and more. Elected representatives are looking for ways to help their communities with recovery. In this current economic climate, and with their unique understanding of the local population and its problems, advice agencies have an unparalleled opportunity to raise their profile and demonstrate their importance.
2. Elected representatives also value the support that you can offer them when dealing with local casework. It is helpful to agree a two-way referral protocol so that you each deal with the cases you are best placed to help with. This could just be for your agency and a particular elected member, or all advice agencies in your area and all locally elected members. It could be formal or informal – as long as it works for those involved it doesn't matter.
3. Some local Councillors will be involved in your Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and will therefore be able to raise awareness of your services among the public, private and third sector organisations involved. For more details please see the guidance notes on 'Local Authorities'.

Challenges

1. Perhaps the biggest challenge in terms of working with elected representatives is remaining independent in the eyes of the community and your clients. By law, charities must never show allegiance to any particular party or party representative. But acting independently is one thing; being perceived as independent is another. Because they often work closely with elected representatives, advice agencies must work hard at managing perceptions. As well as remaining true to your aims and values, and representing clients' views faithfully even when they are at odds with those of elected representatives, you must be seen/ known as such.

How

This section of the guide offers practical suggestions as to how you can build and maintain a relationship with elected representatives.

First, and most important, get to know your elected members. Find out as much information about them as you can and keep your knowledge up to date. Sources of information you can use are:

- Local newspapers – they may write a column or make regular contributions to the letters page;
- Their website or that of their party; and
- Your national network.

Information that is useful to find out includes:

- Current or previous membership of select committees or all party (cross-party) groups – what policy areas do they seem to be interested in or knowledgeable about?
- Career history – what did they do before they were elected?
- Their political track record – are they a ‘rebel’ or do they hold ministerial ambitions?
- Any connection to the advice sector or the not-for-profit sector?

Second, don’t be afraid to approach your elected representatives. Generally they will value your contact and be happy to help. Remember that they are often very busy, though. MPs, for example, will spend much time travelling between their constituency and Westminster, and Councillors will often hold down full time jobs in addition to their work with the Local Authority. It is therefore unlikely that they will be able to help out with every request, but never get disheartened. If inviting them to an event, give as much notice as you can and consider working around their availability. In general correspondence, tailor your approach based on the research you have done, make your point clearly and concisely, and ensure your ‘ask’ is obvious.

Thinking specifically about your MP, for example, you might like to ask them to raise a question in the Commons on your behalf, or to create/ sign an Early Day Motion. According to Parliament’s website, “Early day motions (EDMs) are formal motions submitted for debate in the House of Commons. However, very few EDMs are actually debated. Instead, they are used for reasons such as publicising the views of individual MPs, drawing attention to specific events or campaigns, and demonstrating the extent of parliamentary support for a particular cause or point of view.”

Again, thinking specifically about your MP, you might also like to approach them about the possibility of shadowing their staff and visa versa, to gain a better understanding of how each other works.

More broadly, consider adding elected representatives to your distribution list for publications such as:

- Your annual report (you could even ask one of them to write a foreword as an endorsement of your work);
- Quarterly newsletters;
- E-alerts that might include your latest statistics/ issues arising locally (you are in a unique position of being able to provide robust and timely evidence);
- Subject-specific evidence reports you may have published; and
- Any media coverage you have received.

You could also invite your elected representatives to:

- Visit your agency to see your work in action (this could include a demonstration of interview and research techniques, recording of clients’ data and any follow up work).
- Your AGM (as long as it is interesting and informative).
- Advice Week events that you have organised.

During an election

You should note that in the six weeks prior to an election the Government imposes 'purdah', during which time government departments are not allowed to communicate with members of the public about any new or controversial government initiatives. Similar rules extend to charities.

While charities are legally bound to be politically independent, they are free to contribute to the political process i.e. comment on social, economic or political issues (so long as they fully relate to the aims of your organisation or if they impact on the way you carry out your work). In the course of commenting on such issues, though, you should take particular care during the six week purdah period to avoid furthering or opposing the views of any political party – intentionally or otherwise. Check, for example, whether any solution you advocate happens also to be advocated by a political party. If so, make it clear beyond doubt that your advocacy of it is entirely independent and not linked to any party.

You may rebuke or refute any statement that wrongly criticises your services, and in doing so correct any misinformation, but you cannot directly tell or influence people to vote for or against a political party. You are also allowed to hold public meetings during an election campaign to discuss issues that are relevant to your clients. If you are going to do this, you must ensure that you invite a good representation of candidates who are standing for election, though you are not required to invite them all. Above all, you should ensure that the three main political parties are invited so that all sides of the debate are reasonably represented.

Please seek further guidance on this important issue from your own network.

Key messages for elected representatives

We've come up with a range of key messages that you could use with your elected representatives, if they are appropriate for your advice agency. You will need to modify them with your local detail:

- We act as a 'weather gauge' for the important issues in our local area.
- We have access to a wealth of data on the problems being faced by local people.
- We contribute to improving community cohesion and tackling social exclusion in a number of ways, including outreach services and partnership work.
- We are viewed as independent and so able to work with some of the 'harder to reach' groups in the local community.
- We contribute to the local economy by preventing problems, maximising clients' incomes and by training volunteers who go on into paid employment.
- We have a strong focus on the needs of service users.
- We develop and maintain a strategic plan for our community.
- We are able to access through a partnership approach; funding streams that may not be open to statutory agencies.
- We have knowledge and expertise to meet complex personal needs and tackle difficult social issues.
- We have an ability to be flexible and offer joined-up service delivery.

- We are increasingly working in partnership with other public, private and third sector bodies to reduce duplication and improve the experience of our clients.
- We can work effectively in partnership with you to improve our referral protocols, which will benefit your constituents.
- We are independent of all political parties; our work is always for the good of our clients.

"The free advice sector offers excellent services that are very much appreciated by everyone who has contact with them.

It's vital that there are strong lines of communication between agencies and elected members so that we can work towards the best for our constituents/ clients.

I work closely with the advice agencies in my constituency as we cross-refer cases and hold joint surgeries"

Gwyn Prosser MP for Dover and Deal.

