

How To: lobby your MP to end destitution

Here is your essential guide to lobbying your MP and affecting real change! Big thanks to Mike Kaye, from Still Human Still Here, who provided training for STAR students on this subject.

Make all your hard work for STAR Action Week 2012 count by lobbying your MP - ensuring that Action Week has the BIGGEST POSSIBLE IMPACT!

Lobbying is all about effective advocacy. Advocacy is essentially about highlighting a problem and proposing a solution to CHANGE it! As students, you are in a privileged position to be able to raise awareness amongst your student body and mobilise people to take action! Campaigning aims to take people from **interest to activism** in 10 seconds flat! Ok, maybe a little longer ☺...

If you can mobilise **people** then you have political **power!**

We have already reached thousands of students and members of the public through Action Week with countless STARs nationwide having spent the week of the 20-26th February living off £5 a day, sleeping rough on the streets and quizzing the public to call on the UK government to end the poverty and destitution of asylum seekers.

STAR's aim is to continue the campaign with Still Human Still Here, to end the destitution of asylum seekers, by enabling all STAR students to lobby MPs on the issue of **destitution** among asylum seekers and on the **right to work**. We are asking MPs, who haven't already, to sign the permission to work pledge and to ask all MPs to take action on the issue of low asylum support rates. Download the whole pack or just the relevant sections by clicking on the contents below.

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Mike Kaye says: "If enough ordinary people (who are voters, consumers, workers, etc.) show they are concerned about a particular issue then it indicates to the Government that a failure to act may have political or economic consequences".

1. ENGAGING WITH MPs

“It is the job of our elected representatives to take account of our views and they expect to be lobbied” – Mark Lattimer

There are two main political **limitations** to lobbying and campaigning:

1. Public opinion
2. Money

Public opinion is an incredibly influential factor on MPs – it influences the decisions they make and the causes they align themselves to. You should always bear this in mind when thinking about how you are going to convince MPs/ decision makers to take action in favour of your cause, but don't let it blind you!

But, who are 'decision makers'?

- ★ Government Ministers
- ★ Civil servants
- ★ Advisors
- ★ Local officials (e.g. judiciary, immigration officers, police, social workers)
- ★ MPs
- ★ Individuals or organisations who directly influence the Government (e.g. inter-governmental agencies) could also be considered as decision makers.

Coalition building

Make your campaign stronger by working with other organisations and individuals and involving them in your campaign. Make links with similar organisations (such as local refugee centres) and non-traditional allies, e.g. other student societies. Also seek the support of influential/ respected individuals and groups (e.g. media, sports or music stars, community or religious leaders). If you work in coalition with other organisations you can share resources too.

So, where to start?

1. **Find your MP** at <http://findyourmp.parliament.uk/> by typing in your postcode.
2. **Contact your MP** to request a meeting or you can turn up at constituency surgeries that most MPs hold each week.
3. **Research your MP** to find out what they are interested in and what positions they might hold in parliament. The basic information is at: <http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/mps/>. A Wikipedia search may also help, as well as looking at their personal website or Twitter feed.

1- 2- 3,
it's
easy as
a- b- c!

Then:

- a. **Write** to your MP and ask to meet them (keep it simple, keep it local, make sure it's focused, professional and to the point – remember, they should want to meet you!).
- b. **Phone** your MP. (Follow up on the letter – leave it a week if you sent an email and 2 weeks if it was a letter).
- c. **Meet** with your MP. If you're not having any luck, turn up at your MP's surgery (it's better they know you're coming though).

Before your meeting, don't just think about what you want to say, give them time to talk – you need to know what they think in order to understand their attitude, thereby allowing you to effectively engage with them.

Preparing for meetings – do your research!

- ★ Find out what the decision-maker is interested in already and use this to engage with them.
- ★ Don't ask for the impossible, but for things that the relevant decision-maker can do.
- ★ Consider whether there are limitations on their ability to make policy changes?
- ★ Know when you are being presented with an excuse or a genuine problem which makes it difficult to implement your proposal.
- ★ Establish credibility with the decision-maker.
- ★ Even if your MP doesn't agree with you they can still advocate for you and help you gain access to information that you may need (Government plans, statistics, budgets, forthcoming legislation, etc.)

Evidence is absolutely crucial. You need to be able to back up what you say. Direct experience is great, e.g. "I have tried to live off £5 a day and I can tell you it is extremely hard..."

Making the case to MPs

Communicate in a language that your MP will respond to.

- ★ **Communicate the benefit** of pursuing your proposed policy (prestige, budgetary savings, avoiding political embarrassment, simplicity, efficiency, etc).
- ★ Stress that it will be **good publicity** for your MP! Getting an MP to participate in an activity/ speak at an event may well attract the local press – this is attractive to many MPs as it will help to **raise their profile**.
- ★ Be polite, but do not be intimidated. Remember that if you've done your research **you are likely to know more than they do!** This is your issue!
- ★ Be ready to **answer direct questions**, such as: What do you want me to do? How much will this cost? Who else supports this proposal?
- ★ Give them a **spectrum of reasons** for why what you're proposing is good.
- ★ Address what **their concerns** are first. If you don't know – ask.

Consider the issue from their perspective. Linking your objective to one of their existing priorities or areas of interest will make it relevant to the MP. Place your objective within the existing policy framework wherever possible and try to present it as consistent with their established policy propositions.

Reliable evidence and good analysis are essential to support advocacy positions and to counter arguments and assumptions.

Cost-effectiveness:

"It is much more expensive to deal with the consequences than dealing with the problem before the consequences arise".

Granting asylum seekers **permission to work** is a very easy argument to make, because it's not about changing the occupations that asylum seekers are allowed to work in (currently only in jobs where there are skills shortages) it is just about changing the time frame in which they are granted permission to work (from 1 year to 6 months).

Make sure you have some good **arguments!**

Predict what their argument will be and use that to build your own. **QUOTE THE EVIDENCE YOU'VE COLLECTED FROM THE QUIZ RESULTS!**

Money, money, money!

"Has the government estimated how much money they will save if they allow people seeking asylum to work?"

If communicating with a Lib Dem:

"Permission to work is a manifesto agreement. It is your policy – I am not asking you to do anything that you don't already support".

Preparation check

Make sure you have the answers to the following questions when you meet with/ write to your MP:

1. What is the problem?
2. Why is it urgent?
3. What is the solution?
4. What are the benefits of the solution?

Be clear with your MP

Remember to make it as easy and as clear as possible for the MP/ decision-maker you've targeted to take action in favour of your campaign. Make sure they know what is expected of them and ask something concrete of the MP, such as to sign a petition (like permission to work), to meet you in person, or to write a letter.

2. GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR MP

In order to make your contact with MPs/ decision-makers successful and productive, you need to be able to understand the basics of how the Parliamentary system works and learn what your MP can do for you.

What can MPs do?

There are lots of ways that an MP can help with your campaign. This is a list of the many ways they can be of benefit.

A crossbench amendment is more likely to attract support from around the House.

1. **Sponsor or support amendments to a Bill** (most effectively in Standing Committee). For example, Still Human Still Here drafted an amendment to the 2009 Health Bill which would grant refused asylum seekers' access to free secondary healthcare (2009-10) and lobbied members of the House of Lords to table it for Committee stage.
2. **Sign a petition** – for STAR it would be the permission to work declaration. If the MP is a member of the Government or the shadow frontbench they will probably not sign. If this is the case then you need to get them to do something that they can do. For example, **ask them to write to the Minister for Immigration, Damian Green, on behalf of one of their constituents (you), to ask for the permission for asylum seekers to work etc.**
3. **Raise an issue with the Minister** – private and personal.
4. **Lobby internally** for changes to their own parties, policies or priorities.
5. Put down a **Parliamentary Question**, written or oral, or a PMQ (Prime Minister's Questions). – indicates concern, can educate or obtain information. Must be a question not a statement.
6. **Sponsor or sign an Early Day Motion (EDM)** – provides a litmus test of backbench support and list of interested MPs. Normally EDMs are never debated and a huge number are tabled each session. EDMs can be useful if you want to show there is a large group of backbench support.
7. **Raise issue during appropriate debates** or put down for an Adjournment debate (balloted each week)
8. **Take up issue via Select Committees** (Foreign Affairs, International Development, Home Affairs, Joint Committee on Human Rights).

The best place to **achieve change** is at the **Committee Stage** in the House of Lords.

Don't do an EDM if you're not going to get more than **50 signatures**. If it is less than 50 it might even undermine your cause.

9. **All Party Parliamentary Groups** (country or subject groups, human rights, trafficking, overseas development, HIV / AIDs, refugees, etc.)
10. **Table a Private Members' Bill** (around 20 a session).
11. **Host a meeting in Parliament** or elsewhere (as this is convenient for MPs they are more likely to attend).

ASK STAR NATIONAL

Phone us for any advice on how to get the most out of your MP, or for practice, if you have a meeting coming up with you MP.

020 7729 8880 ext. 205

3. Post-contact action

Whether you have sent an email to your MP, spoken to them on the phone, or met face-to-face, we want to know about it! Here's what to do following any contact with your MP.

1. Let STAR national know!

Give us a call or send us an email – we want to know what contact you have had with your MP and how successful it has been.

2. Write to your MP to thank them for their help and support.

- Let your MP know how grateful you are for their support.
- If they have not been supportive then contact us anyway and we can advise you how to keep up the pressure and get them to take some form of action!
- Remember in your letter/ email to include any action points you agreed, such as what you asked your MP to do, what was agreed, did you say you'd follow up with anything? E.g. sending them any reports. These action points are very useful to have in writing.

3. Pat yourself on the back!

Congratulations! You have successfully lobbied to help change the lives of thousands of asylum seekers in the UK! Well done you for completing arguably the most important action that STAR national are asking from its student groups this year. Thank you!