

Engagement Network

Young People's Guide to: Working with Local Councillors and MPs

© National Youth Agency, July 2011

The National Youth Agency, as part of our programme of work commissioned by the Local Government Group, has developed this guide to help young people and those working with young people to engage effectively with local councillors and MPs.

The NYA carries out a wide-ranging programme of work on behalf of the Local Government Group to support councils in their work with young people.

The Local Government Group is here to support, promote and improve local government.

Eastgate House
19–23 Humberstone Road
Leicester LE5 3GJ
Tel: 0116 242 7350
Fax: 0116 242 7444
Email: nya@nya.org.uk
Website: www.nya.org.uk

www.local.gov.uk

Introduction

This guide has been designed to support young people and organisations working with young people in engaging with local councillors and MPs, and throughout this report local councillors and MPs are referred to as elected representatives.

Contact details for all local councillors and MPs and their political parties can be found at your local library on the internet or through your local authority.

Members of Parliament

To find out who your local member of parliament (MP) is you can insert your postcode at <http://findyourmp.parliament>. MPs are also listed in the phone book and on the internet. You can contact MPs by letter, email or phone at their local constituency office or their office in the House of Commons. Many MPs hold regular surgeries and these are often advertised in the local paper where you can go and talk about issues individually or in groups.

Elected Councillors

Towns and cities and rural areas in the UK are governed by democratically elected councils, often called local authorities. Local authorities are either a unitary or single tier authority with responsible for all local government functions usually within a large town or city or a two-tier authority, where local government functions are divided across a county between county councils (the upper tier, cover the whole county and provide 80 per cent of services including children services) and district councils (cover a smaller area and provide services including housing and leisure).

All types of authority elect councillors who oversee the different functions of the authority. Local councillors govern specific areas usually known as wards or divisions and there are often more than one councillor representing a ward or division. Many candidates stand for council election as members of a political party. Local councillors also hold regular surgeries for the public. Again, these are often advertised in the local paper and you can talk about any issues

you may have face to face.

Local authorities also have elected representative (unitary or county councillors) portfolio holders with specific responsibility for children and young people. To find out who holds the portfolio for children and young people in your area you can contact your local authority, usually via the council democratic services, or through the council website.

Parish and Town Councillors

Parish and town councillors are responsible for and have limited powers relating to their parish or town which may include management of town or village centres, community halls and parks. There are around 10,000 parish and town councils in some parts of England. To find out whether your local area is governed by a parish or town council contact your local authority through their website.

Leader of Council and Mayor

Many local councils appoint a mayor who is the ceremonial leader of the council, but in some areas a mayor is appointed to be the council leader. The leader heads up the council and is sometimes referred to as the Chair of the council.

3 Getting it right for young people

If you would like to find out who is the leader of your local council and whether your area has a mayor check your local authority website for details and contact information.

London Mayor and Greater London Authority

London has its own unique political arrangements; with 33 boroughs that are unitary authorities responsible for all local services, and the **Greater London Authority (GLA)** provides London-wide government, including special responsibility for police, fire, transport and strategic planning. The GLA consists of a directly-elected executive **Mayor of London** and an elected 25-member **London Assembly** with scrutiny powers.

If you would like to find out more about the Greater London Authority, Mayor of London or London Assembly contact www.london.gov.uk.

Each London borough has elected representatives with specific responsibility for children and young people. To find out who holds the portfolio for children and young people you can contact your local authority, usually via the council democratic services, or through the council website.

Youth Parliament

There are 600 elected UK Youth Parliament (UKYP) representatives in the UK, run by young people for young people. For more information about your local UKYP representatives contact <http://www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk/20418/index.html>

Why do you need to work with elected representatives?

Youth issues are important to elected representatives. They need to be kept up to date with details about what is happening locally so that they can influence policy decisions at both a local and national level.

The most relevant elected representative for you to engage with will depend on what the issue is and what you want to, or need, them to do. For example, if you wish to raise awareness and influence the support of elected members to your local youth project you may wish to contact your local councillors (especially those with a portfolio or responsibility for young people).

Or, if you would like to invite local dignitaries to a youth event you are hosting you may wish to invite the leader of your local council and/or the mayor along with your local councillors (especially those with a portfolio for young people).

If you live within a town or parish council area you may wish to contact your local town or parish councillors about your work and/or concerns within your area.

MPs should usually be contacted when:

- There are concerns regarding national policy
- Local concerns have already been raised with local councillors

4 Getting it right for young people

Or, because you may wish to make them aware or invite them to an event related to their work interests or portfolio responsibilities.

How do you engage with elected representatives?

Before contacting elected members you need to identify:

- Why do you want to tell them about your work?
- When is the best time to do this?
- How do they like to be approached?

Through answering these questions, you will have identified the key ways to effectively engage with elected representatives.

Research

First of all you need to ensure that you match your agenda with that of theirs through thorough research. Find

their viewpoints and party affiliation. Background information on elected representatives can often be found via Google searches, local newspapers, local authority committee reports and via their website (if they have one).

Equipping yourself with knowledge on their viewpoints and their stance on issues relevant to you and/or your work, will help you establish a better relationship with them in the long term by enabling you to tailor your approach.

For example, an elected representative with an employment background or portfolio responsibility for young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) would usually be the best point of contact for related issues.

Elected representatives with a marketing or communications background may well be the best placed to advise you on how to promote your work. It is always good to see what skills your elected representatives have that you can share.

Relationship

Secondly, you will need to build a relationship with elected representatives. If you have not made contact with your local elected member previously it is advisable to send them an introductory letter or email to introduce you and/or your work. The letter ideally should be typed and on one side of A4 paper, preferably with a suitable letterhead. Put some effort into coming up with a snappy, interesting headline. Put the really important information in the first sentence. Generally it should answer the questions who, what, where, when and why. Use short sentences and paragraphs and active, dynamic language and avoid jargon. Ensure you have provided elected representatives with the brief, concise but complete information about the work.

A useful way of getting your name known is to offer elected representatives with help on something relevant to them as illustrated in the example introductory letter over the page.

5 Getting it right for young people

Letter Template To Introduce Yourself to Local Councillor/ MP

(Cllr/Mr/Mrs) first name or initial and last name

Their job title

Address 1

Address 2

City

Postcode

Date

Your name

Your address 1

Your address 2
City

Postcode

Dear (Cllr/Mr/Mrs) last name

RE : ‘That’s Not My Name’ youth initiative

I am writing to introduce to you a new youth initiative to support young people in Leicestershire in dispelling negative stereotypes and becoming recognised members of the local community.

‘That’s Not My Name’ was launched in July 2010 by a group of young people who identified, after undertaking research funded by the National Youth Agency, that, although many young people in the area are doing great things locally, the local media did not cover this. They also found that negative reports about activities undertaken by a minority of young people locally were generating and reinforcing negative stereotypes amongst older generations.

I would really like the opportunity to talk to you about our work in further detail and how our research has enabled us to create partnerships with local voluntary organisations and the press to build bridges across the community. We would also be interested in hearing about how you are representing the voice of the local young people at a national level.

We have a monthly young persons steering group, which we would be delighted for you to attend next month. If you are unable to attend in person, we can also provide you with a briefing paper from these meetings to keep you updated on the view of local young people within your ward/constituency and the progress we are making in bringing to fruition the coalition government’s localism agenda.

I look forward to hearing from you about your availability to attend the meeting on the 29th April and can be contacted on XXXXX.

Yours sincerely

6 Getting it right for young people

Regular Contact

This introductory letter should be followed up by a phone call request to arrange a face to face meeting to discuss how you would like to work together with your elected representative.

When to communicate with elected

representatives?

Engagement with elected representatives needs to be done at a specific point during a project, as this normally provides the reason to communicate and is more relevant to them. The most common project engagement points are:

1. When you have won funding to undertake your project
2. When you have started your project
3. When you are facing challenges or obstacles
4. When you need to find people to help you with your work
5. When you want to announce your findings/outcomes.

When you have identified which elected representatives you wish to contact, how, when and what you wish to communicate with them you might wish to create a communication plan so that you can keep track of what you are doing and where you are at.

The communication plan below can be used as a template for you to fill in your own planned project communication milestones:

Milestone	Who	How	Why	Result
Won project funding	Local MP, local Councillors and Parish Councillors	Letter		Inform them doing work
Project Launch		Letter		Invite Mayor to launch project
Young Peoples Celebration Event				

7 Getting it right for young people

This communication plan can also be adapted to support you when you are facing any issues or challenges:

Challenges	Who	How	Why	Outcome
Youth Centre facing closure	Local MP, local Councillors and Parish Councillors	Letter		Detail impact on local young people
Youth Service cuts				Detail impact on local young people

Whatever your reason for contacting your local elected representative it is important for you to contact them well in advance to discuss ways of getting them involved in your work and/or attend events. You might want to invite an elected representative to be a VIP guest at an event or if you have a planning or steering group meeting you could invite them to join it. If you are arranging an event remember elected representatives have very busy diaries and may not be able to attend your event/ meeting without sufficient notice (two-three months).

Depending on the nature and size of your work you might also want to consider producing a regular written briefing for representatives to keep them informed about your work as it develops. When developing your briefing it needs to include:

1. Details on your work or organisation, what you aim to achieve, who you partners with and how you do this
2. This then needs to be followed by a breakdown of each project you undertake, what the project does, how it does it and what you have achieved to date
3. Under each project you should clearly detail any assistance you need from your local elected representative and who they should contact to make this happen
4. Why not add some photos of young people involved with your project to illustrate the work and provide a human story.

Briefings should be undertaken on a quarterly basis and need to be concise and to the point so elected representatives can access information quickly and identify if you need help in any specific areas.

8 Getting it right for young people

Other Useful References

The LG Group quick guide to local government

This guide provides a useful overview of the role of local government, how councils are organised, how decisions are made, how local authorities engage with communities and election processes, the guide is available on the internet at: <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/aio/17923562>

You and Your MP

This factsheet gives an introduction to the work of Members of Parliaments and the ways in which they might be able to help you, the fact sheet is available on the internet at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/guides/factsheets/members-elections/m01/>

How to Lobby your Local Councillor, MP or MEP

Young Timebank has produced a factsheet detailing tips for writing to elected members to lobby for support, the factsheet is available on the internet at:

http://www.youngtimebank.org.uk/download/How_to_lobby_your_Councillor_MP_or_MEP.pdf

About the National Youth Agency

The National Youth Agency works in partnership with a wide range of public, private and voluntary sector organisations to support and improve services for young people. Our particular focus is on youth work and we believe strongly that by investing in young people's personal and social development, young people are better able to live more active and fulfilling lives.

Working with young people, we advocate for more youth-friendly services and policies. We have four themes:

- Developing quality standards in work with young people
- Supporting services for young people
- Developing the youth workforce
- Promoting positive public perceptions of young people.

We deliver our work through training and consultancy, campaigning, publishing and online communications. Through our activities we want to ensure that young people have a strong voice and positive influence in our society.

National Youth Agency
Eastgate House
19-23 Humberstone Road
Leicester LE5 3GJ

Tel: 0116 242 7350

Email: nya@nya.org.uk

Website: www.nya.org.uk

For more information, visit www.nya.org.uk