

7. LOBBYING POLITICIANS

One of WDM's core aims is to win changes in government policy in Britain and Europe that will improve the lives of poor communities in the global south. Constituency lobbying can:

- Keep the profile of development issues high amongst politicians in Britain.
- Raise issues with ministers via MPs, thus building political pressure to change policy.
- Bolster and lend credibility to lobbying done by WDM's staff.

It is a cornerstone of our democracy that our elected representatives listen to, and take into account, the concerns of their constituents. Because of the unjust way the global economy works, many of the decisions which affect the lives of people in Africa, Asia and Latin America are made in Europe, including Britain. That's why lobbying is so important.

WHO TO LOBBY

When it comes to lobbying, WDM's first stop would normally be to lobby MPs because they have the most influence in the areas relevant to our campaigns, for example, direct access to the UK government ministers making key decisions in policy areas on which we hope to have an impact. However, there may be cases where it is appropriate to lobby other levels of government.

Many groups find that they have members in more than one constituency and therefore that they are able to lobby more than one MP. This is good news as you can have more of an impact in your area if you are lobbying two or more politicians. It is worth checking with group members what their postcodes are and then using the website www.writetothem.com to find which constituencies your membership covers.

FIND OUT ABOUT YOUR MP

The more you know about your local representative the better able you will be to lobby them effectively. The website www.theyworkforyou.com allows you to keep up with the voting record and interests of your MP. You can also go to the library and look them up in Dods Parliamentary Companion, which gives a brief profile of MPs.

Another way of finding out more is to give their researcher or secretary a ring. Not all politicians have researchers but all have a secretary. You can find out who they are through your local constituency office or by ringing their parliamentary office (parliament's switchboard number is 020 7219 3000). It is worth building up a friendly relationship with your MP's staff. Explain that you are a group working on world poverty issues in the constituency and that you wondered if your elected representative has any related interests, background or sits on any relevant select committees.

WRITING LETTERS TO YOUR MP

Writing letters is the most common method of raising issues with your elected representative and one of the most effective. Politicians are obliged to answer all constituents' letters. They will invariably pass them on to the relevant minister who is in turn obliged to respond to them, and they will then forward the minister's response to you. Writing a letter to your elected representative therefore also raises the issue with the minister. If you can demonstrate that your concerns are of constituency interest the local politician is likely to be even more attentive.

Letters to politicians usually pass through the filter of their staff first. They get hundreds of letters a week. In order to ensure yours is noticed:

- Keep it concise (preferably no more than one side of A4) and simple, addressing only one issue at a time.
- Pay attention to presentation. Detail is important too. Check correct spelling of all names and addresses etc.
- With Early Day Motions, make sure that your elected representative is not already one of those sponsoring an EDM. If you find that your elected representative is a sponsor you could write to congratulate them instead. Government ministers won't sign EDMs, but it is still worth writing to them about the issue.
- Ensure that you get your facts right. WDM will provide you with background briefings on campaigns but if you are not sure about something please give the office a ring.
- If you have a representative who is unsympathetic to WDM or our issues, it might be worth writing a

letter just as a concerned constituent, as you may get a more helpful response.

- A politician will notice the volume of letters they get on a subject. Try to write individually rather than as a group, or as well as a group letter.
- Ask specific questions, particularly questions that they need to consider before answering. This will help ensure they read your letter and the minister's response.
- Standard letters are more likely to get a standard party drafted response if writing several letters as a group. A carefully worded individual letter should stand out more and get a more prompt reply.

Follow letters up the following week with a phone call to the MP's office.

FACE TO FACE MEETINGS

All elected politicians hold regular surgeries in their constituencies so that people have direct access to them. You can find out the times of your own surgery by contacting your constituency office or your library.

In order to get a decent amount of time with your elected representative it is best to ring in advance to make an appointment, otherwise you could find that you are only given a few minutes. Constituency surgeries are often very busy with people who have very pressing personal needs. Politicians may take unkindly to a WDM delegation descending unannounced on the constituency office to talk about world poverty issues.

MPs spend most of the week in Westminster usually from Monday lunchtime to Thursday evening/Friday morning. Parliament is in recess from the end of July to end of October and also takes a break for two weeks or more at Christmas and Easter. Most MPs run constituency surgeries on Fridays or Saturdays.

When trying to book a meeting it is worth bearing in mind that calls made early in a parliamentary session, when the politician has lots of time, are more likely to meet with a favourable response than those made near the close. On average such meetings last between ten minutes and half an hour, so be as succinct as possible.

HOW TO HAVE A SUCCESSFUL MEETING

It is a good idea to go with a delegation of people to give the impression you are more than just a lone



South East London WDM lobby Lewisham West MP Jim Dowd (left) on paying the UK's climate debt in November 2009.

voice. Try and explain clearly to the politician's office in advance why you want the meeting, what issues you want to discuss and what the aim of the meeting is. Ensure your contribution is suitably pitched to the politician's level of knowledge. Some politicians may know very little, if anything, about the issues we want to raise.

While it is not essential to know everything about a subject, be well prepared. Anticipate both sides of the argument – knowing what you want and why your representative could object to it (particularly if not naturally sympathetic) is a good way of preparing. Always ask your representative to do something specific such as signing an EDM or asking a question in parliament.

Get one of your members to take notes at the meeting and follow the meeting up with a letter to say thanks for their time, reiterate any key points and remind them of any proposed action.

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Because each region of the UK is represented by a group of MEPs, you can contact any or all of the MEPs who represent your area when you wish to raise an issue. However it might be more appropriate to raise an issue with a particular MEP because they sit on a

Lobbying MPs on climate change

In 2008 over 25 WDM groups took part in the climate change bill week of action, alongside other campaigning organisations including Friends of the Earth, CAFOD and Christian Aid. The groups held press stunts using Gordon Brown masks and cardboard aeroplanes to highlight the contradiction of omitting aviation from emissions reduction targets. In addition, some groups held stalls, went street-campaigning and marched through town-centres with banners and placards. The proliferation of local press coverage that resulted from this week of action brought significant pressure to bear on MPs who had already been lobbied by letter and face to face on the issue of strengthening the draft climate change bill. And it worked!

When the climate change bill became an Act the government had made amendments committing to an emissions reduction target of 80 per cent, with annual targets, and aviation and shipping emissions were included; these amendments covered all three of the key asks campaigners were pushing for throughout the draft bill process. The turnaround during this process was due in no small part to the concerted efforts of activists all over the country who made strengthening the climate change bill a key issue for their MPs.

relevant committee, or because they are likely to be sympathetic.

MEPs divide their time between working in their region, attending committee and political group meetings in Brussels, and spending one week a month in Strasbourg when the full parliament meets. This means that they can be difficult to get hold of and that they don't necessarily run surgeries in the same way as MPs (although some do).

However, you should be able to make an appointment to meet any of your MEPs. Their contact details can be obtained from the UK office of the European parliament, at www.europarl.org.uk or on 020 7227 4300.

WDM will advise local groups when it is useful to contact your MEP and about what.

SUPPORT FROM WDM

Just like with other forms of campaigning, the WDM office will give you all the support you need to lobby your elected representatives effectively. WDM staff produce briefings tailored specifically to politicians and written advice when we want you to lobby over a specific issue, including through the monthly *Think Global* mailing. WDM campaigners are also happy to give group members advice over the phone.