

# Guide to engaging with your MP

Ecologists can play a crucial role in shaping legislation by engaging with policy makers and providing evidence-based data on ecological topics. Your expertise can be an asset to members of Parliament as they create and debate environmental legislation and policy. Developing a positive working relationship with members of Parliament can improve the trust between scientists and policy makers, while supporting policies that will be based on empirical evidence.

The Ecological Society of Australia's (ESA) guide will help you navigate and cultivate relationships with your local MP. Within this guide, you'll find information about:

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## 1. Making contact

To first find your electorate, go to <https://electorate.aec.gov.au>

Using your postcode, search for your local MP here [https://www.aph.gov.au/Senators and Members](https://www.aph.gov.au/Senators_and_Members). This will also bring up all your State Senators who may also be good to contact.

You can connect with your MP in a variety of ways - aside from seeking a face to face meeting, you can also communicate with them by sending them an email, a letter or calling their office directly.

### ***Requesting a meeting***

Meeting with your local MP or their advisors is a critical step for developing the trust, connection, and positive working relationship to provide policy makers evidence towards their legislation. Only a small percentage of people visit their MP, thus as a scientist in that electorate, your voice will matter.

- Members of Parliaments and their staff are incredibly busy. They will need to schedule an appointment to meet their constituents.
- Your first meeting may be with an office manager or advisor rather than the MP. Do not discount the value of staff as they are the eyes and ears of the member and can help your voice be heard.
- If you're concerned about going alone, find other ESA members/ecologists in your area who will help strengthen your message.
- Know when your local MP will be home in their electorate before scheduling a meeting. You can find out when they are in Canberra or home by checking the sitting calendar - [https://www.aph.gov.au/News and Events/Events Calendar](https://www.aph.gov.au/News_and_Events/Events_Calendar).

### ***Writing a letter/email***

Requesting a meeting in writing is usually preferred - if you call first, most MP's office will ask that you put your request to them in an email or letter.

Keep your email short. Key information to let them know who you are and why you want to meet with them should include;

- your name
- where you're from (tell them you're a constituent!)
- what you work on
- the organisation you represent (if applicable)
- one or two sentences on your reasons for meeting – this can be an issue you'd like to discuss or simply offer your support as an expert in the field of ecology
- who will attend the meeting
- when you'd like to meet.

Personalising your email is strongly encouraged. For example, if your local MP has already made positive steps in the environment or sustainability sectors, you could thank them for the action they have already taken. Explaining why a particular ecological issue is important to you could make a big impact. You could do this by including a relevant personal experience or example. Storytelling used in conjunction with statistics is crucial in helping politicians understand the need for change.

It's important to use the correct title. To appropriately address your letter or email check the Government's guidelines here - [https://www.aph.gov.au/Senators and Members/Guidelines for Contacting Senators and Members/How to address Senators and Members](https://www.aph.gov.au/Senators_and_Members/Guidelines_for_Contacting_Senators_and_Members/How_to_address_Senators_and_Members)

Remember to provide all your contact details and ask the MP's office to get back to you. If you do not hear from them within two weeks, you can follow up with a phone call to confirm that the office has received your request and to reiterate that you are looking forward to hearing back from them. MPs and their staff are very busy, and it may take them time to respond to your request – be patient.

If your request for a meeting is not successful at first, don't give up. Persistence is key. Remain friendly, polite and respectful in your requests for a greater chance of eventually securing a meeting time. If you are contacted, be prepared to be flexible regarding date and time of your meeting.

Once you've secured a meeting date and time, start to plan ahead for the meeting.

## 2. Preparing for a meeting

### ***Research***

Before meeting the MP, conduct some background research about them and their support on legislations. Make sure you know how to pronounce their name and how you should address them.

A good place to start is the Parliament House website - [https://www.aph.gov.au/senators\\_and\\_members/members](https://www.aph.gov.au/senators_and_members/members), and the MP's own website. From your online research you should know which party they belong to, whether they hold any position in that party, how long they've been in parliament, the committees on which (s)he serves, and their positions on various issues. It might be useful to read their first maiden speech, or their most recent speech, usually available on the Parliament House website - this is where people make a statement about who they are, what they believe in, what they want to work towards.

If your MP is on social media, this could be an immediate and more informal way to see how they view the current hottest issues.

If you are representing an organisation, such as the ESA as an ESA Envoy, you want to be a credible representative and be able to answer questions about the organisation.

### ***Know what you want***

There are several reasons why you might want to visit a MP. You may want to raise an issue, offer support as an expert in the field to provide evidence-based information on ecological topics, suggest they vote against or for a bill in Parliament or more.

Be prepared with your message and know the actions you want to ask of the MP. Depending on which party the MP belongs to, whether they are a state or federal member of parliament, if they hold a ministerial portfolio, or are a member of a relevant committee or other group - and what their views are on the issue, your ask will differ for each MP.

However, keep in mind that building a two-way relationship with these meetings, rather than always asking something of your MP, will have a meaningful and lasting impact.

Other tips for effectively communicating your message;

- Know your issue well, but don't feel like you have to be the expert. Your visit to your local MP highlights the importance of this topic to you as a constituent.
- Stick with one or two topics of interest to keep the conversation focused and productive. Don't get side-tracked with a conversation of unrelated issues.
- Use your personal stories – sharing your own experiences will help build trust. While data and numbers are important, stories and metaphors are the most effective way of communicating.
- Simplify your desired policy change in 12 words or less and then develop three short arguments to explain why that change should be supported.
- Know the counterarguments, anticipate questions or potential pushback and prepare thoughtful, compelling responses.

## ***Creating a one-pager***

Providing a 'one-pager' document where you highlight issues and outline the asks is another effective mode of communication with the MP.

The one-pager should be clear, concise, evidence-based, and written in lay language so people without scientific knowledge can read and understand your main points. Keep the sentences sharp, short, and simple. You may want to include your contact details on the page to allow the MP or their staff to contact you at a later date with questions.

If you don't have time or resources to create an original one-pager, it's still helpful to bring a one-page document or brochure about your science, organisation, or business. This could include a relevant 'Hot Topic' which you can find on the ESA webpage.

## ***Team up***

Teaming up with other people who care about the issue (e.g. other local ESA members) can offer you moral support and back-up. If you decide to have a team, keep the team small (3 – 4 people total) and let the MP's office know of the other people joining you.

Before meeting the MP or staff member, determine who would lead the conversation and what each person will discuss. The lead person would introduce your group members, begin the discussion and conclude the meeting. One person should also be assigned to take notes of everything that is said during the meeting – especially any commitments that are made. Remember that each participant should have the opportunity to talk during the meeting.

## **3. At the meeting**

A few additional tips for the meeting itself:

- Arrive on-time, dress appropriately (e.g. casual business attire), and remember to bring business cards and the one-pager document you created above, or a relevant 'Hot Topic.'
- Be patient if the member is late, cannot attend, or if the meeting gets interrupted.
- Meetings with MPs are generally scheduled for 30 minutes. The format usually includes welcome and introductions, business card exchange, discuss your topic and provide the one-pager, and wrap up. Be flexible with your time as meetings can be shorter due to time constraints from the MP or staff member, or can go overtime.
- Do not underestimate the influence of the member's staff or advisors.
- Have a good balance between facts and passion for real issues.
- MPs may ask questions that are outside your particular field of work. Be as responsive as you can without guessing. Be honest and admit that you don't know the answer, but that you will reach out to other members of ESA to help find the answer and that you will get back to the MP.
- Local MPs are always interested in what is happening in their local community, so if you have a local story that is relevant, be sure to mention it. Keep it brief and to the point.
- Remain neutral and positive – do not be arrogant, condescending, or demand anything of your MP, or their staff.
- Use notes to help remind you of points you want to make, but do not read a speech to the MP.
- Remember to keep jargon and acronyms to a minimum – your MP and their staff may not have a science degree!
- Do not assume the MP or staff member is familiar with your issue. To guide your discussion and discussion level, you can ask them a question about their background in the topic.
- Staff and MPs will ask you questions if they are interested in the topic. If you find that they are losing interest, do not panic. You can re-engage them by asking them a question. Ensure there is a dialogue and not a monologue.

- If a follow up is warranted, create this opportunity by inviting them to visit your institution, field site, conference etc.
- Thank your MP and staff for meeting with you. Ask for the business cards of any advisers present at the meeting if you haven't already received them. Indicate that you appreciate their time and would be happy to meet with them again at any stage in the future.

## 4. After the meeting

Following the meeting, write an email or letter to thank your MP and/or staff for their time. This helps keep the lines of communication open after a face-to-face or phone meeting. Your follow-up email could include:

- any further information you were asked for but didn't have on-hand at the time of the meeting
- any contacts who may be able to help them further with a particular specialist ecological query
- link to an ESA 'Hot Topic' page if relevant; if there isn't a relevant 'Hot Topic,' reach out to the ESA Policy Working Group (email) to suggest a new 'Hot Topic.'
- your contact details again as a reminder that they can contact you with further queries
- confirmation that you will maintain contact (and send Quarterly ESA Policy Bulletins if applicable).

If you met the MP or staff as a team, have a debrief to discuss how the meeting went, such as what worked, what didn't, and how you could do it better next time. Ensure everyone is on the same page with any commitments that were made by the MP, or any commitments you might have made to provide further information.

If you do not hear back within a month, call or write to ask the MP's office whether they have taken any actions on the commitments they made during the meeting. Again, polite persistence is key. You can also set reminders in your calendar to stay in touch. Regular communication about developments in your research or the issues you discussed can make a difference. If you see an event or inquiry that concerns you or is of interest, write to the electorate office to let them know. The ultimate goal is to gain trust and build a sustainable relationship.

Your efforts to connect with your MP may make a difference without you knowing it. As a general voter, you can also speak with candidates from all sides to help your case on ecological issues. Discussing ecological topics with members across parties show your willingness to be bipartisan on evidence-based science policies.

Similarly, it's not only Ministers who can make a difference - don't underestimate the power of a backbencher.

## 5. Social media

The advent and popularity of social media has transformed how constituents connect with their local Members of Parliament. Through platforms like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, you can directly reach a MP or Senator instantly. Be sure to indicate whether you are a constituent and update your profile to follow your elected member. Ideally, use hashtags and tag your local MP or candidate.

e.g. the Stroke Foundation recently launched a twitter campaign for members to contact their local MPs. A suggested tweet was:

*Stroke kills more men than prostate cancer and more women than breast cancer. It doesn't have to be this way*  
 #fightstroke #savotes #makeSAGreat @strokefdn @ScottMorrisonMP

To understand how to best use Twitter, you can also look at the following website from Oxfam on pancreatic cancer action at <https://pancreaticcanceraction.org/news/lobby-mp-twitter/>.

Note that while you may be tagging in a MP, (s)he may still miss the post. Social media can be difficult due to its ability to be easily misused, and for the large number of people that use it for trolling and potential abuse.

Additionally, some MPs are more active on social media than others. And, it may be that their staff member is writing their tweet, rather than themselves.

## **6. More information**

Please do not hesitate to contact us at the Policy WG at [policy@ecolsoc.org.au](mailto:policy@ecolsoc.org.au) for more advice and assistance.