

Amnesty International

How to lobby your member of parliament



Lobbying MPs is an essential part of Amnesty International UK's (AIUK) work, with the aim of campaigning for effective Parliamentary action against human rights abuses internationally. If Student Action Groups approach their MPs, this provides another channel of communication to the government from AIUK, thereby helping us raise the profile of human rights and Amnesty International in Parliament.

MPs (and MEPs) are sensitive to the opinions of their constituents – even if they disagree with them. They will always give high priority to requests from constituents and are concerned about getting local publicity. So remember that you are important to them!

Who is your MP?

The first step to lobbying Parliament is to find out as many basic details about your MP as possible, i.e. his/her name, party and constituency. To find this information out, ask your sabbatical officers, telephone the House of Commons information service on (020) 7219 3000, or contact your local Town Hall. You can also find this information at www.writetothem.com by typing in your postcode.

Unless you are studying in your home town you are in the unique position of having two MPs to focus your lobbying efforts on! However, if you want to approach your MP as an Amnesty International Student Action Group (as opposed to an individual member), then obviously your university MP is the one to go for.

How to approach them

First, decide if you want to write to, or have a meeting with your MP. You might want to write to them and invite them to address one of your meetings or debates or to attend an event you have organised – MPs are usually keen to participate if the local press is involved. If you decide to write to them about a campaign concern, then follow the instructions on AIUK's campaign material.



Alternatively, www.writetothem.com has a facility where you can send an email to your MP direct from their website on your behalf.

If you would like to meet with your MP then write explaining that you represent an Amnesty International Student Action Group and the nature of the issue you would like to discuss. If possible, include some information on the subject and perhaps some information about Amnesty. If you do not hear back after 2 weeks, then follow up your request by telephone.

Whether you are sending an email, letter or a letter accompanied by additional material, remember to keep it short!

If you would like to keep up with what your MP is saying and doing in Parliament then www.theyworkforyou.com can send you email updates with this information.

Amnesty International

How to lobby your member of parliament



Glossary:

Parliamentary Questions (PQs)

ORAL PQs are questions designed to put pressure on the government for signalling concern or for eliciting information. They are submitted by MPs to be answered on a particular day. The main advantage of oral questions is that they can be followed by a supplementary question which is not confined to seeking information. MPs can thus use supplementary questions to make a topical political point.

WRITTEN PQs are questions responded to in writing which may contain more detailed information.

If you decide to ask your MP to 'table' a question it is important to send him/her concise background information and, if possible, a draft for the question. Don't worry about the format; your MP will put the question in parliamentary language.

Early Day Motions (EDMs)

EDMs are brief expressions of concern, support or dismay, often about something the government has or hasn't done or something relevant to Parliament or UK policy.

EDMs are put down in writing by one or more MPs either from the same or different parties. They can be signed by any MP to signify support and exist until the end of the Parliamentary session. All-party support from EDMs is much more effective, as well as being important to ensure Amnesty International's political neutrality.

Issues expressed in EDMs only very rarely lead to a debate, but they can encourage government action and provide a focus for lobbying. If a significant number of (over 100) signatures are collected this can be used to attract press coverage.

When an EDM is tabled it is given a number, which you can give to any MP you ask to sign it, and which you can use as a reference when enquiring about the number of signatures it has attracted.

UK Parliament and Government (Westminster)

Members of Parliament (MPs)

The UK currently has 650 members elected to the House of Commons. Together all MPs represent the concerns of the electorate, particularly their own constituents, by proposing, debating and voting upon legislation brought before them and by voicing opinions on government proposals.



A larger number of other MPs are then allocated to ministerial departments as Ministers of State or Parliamentary Secretaries. Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries cannot ask PQs or sign EDMs (see below).

Amnesty International

How to lobby your member of parliament



Ministers

Ministers are appointed by the Prime Minister of the day. The most senior Ministers are the Secretaries of State. They preside over specific Government Departments like the Home Office and the Foreign Office.

The Cabinet

The Cabinet is formed from 22 Secretaries of State, including spokespersons for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The main opposition parties also appoint 'shadow' Ministers of the main department.

Scottish Parliament and Government (Edinburgh)

Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs)

There are currently 129 Scottish Members of Parliament. 73 of them are constituency MSPs; they represent the same 73 constituencies as Westminster MPs, but focus on certain matters affecting Scotland ('devolved' issues). The other 56 MSPs are regional MSPs; they represent the 8 Scottish regions (7 MSPs per region) and also focus on devolved issues.

The MSPs meet at Holyrood in Edinburgh. They pass laws on devolved issues like healthcare and education. MSPs also have offices in their local constituencies.

The Scottish Government

16 of the 129 MSPs are in the Scottish Government and they are responsible for Scottish Government funding expenditure, introducing new policies and running government departments such as Health, Education, Justice and Transport.



The Cabinet

The 6 most senior members of the Scottish Government make up the Cabinet and include; the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and 4 Cabinet Secretaries.

Welsh Assembly and Welsh Assembly Government (Cardiff Bay)

Welsh Assembly Members (AMs)

There are 60 AMs. 40 of them represent the same 40 constituencies as Westminster MPs. 20 are elected on a top-up regional system: each of the 5 Welsh regions has 4 regional AMs. This means that you have the option of lobbying your constituency AM, and/or your 4 regional AMs, as well as your Westminster MP.

Amnesty International

How to lobby your member of parliament



AMs meet at the Senedd in Cardiff Bay. They pass laws on certain matters affecting Wales ('devolved' issues). They also have offices in their local constituencies.

The Welsh Assembly Government

15 of the 60 AMs are in the Welsh Assembly Government and they are responsible for the Welsh Assembly Government expenditure, introducing new policies and running government departments such as Health and Education.

The Cabinet

The 9 most senior members of the Welsh Assembly Government make up the Cabinet and include: the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and 7 other Ministers (appointed by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister). There are also 4 Deputy Ministers, but they are not part of the Cabinet.

Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive (Belfast)

Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs)

There are 108 MLAs, representing 18 constituencies. Each constituency has 6 MLAs (as well as 1 Westminster MP). MLAs meet at Parliament Buildings in Stormont, Belfast. They debate issues and introduce laws on certain matters affecting Northern Ireland. They also check what the Northern Ireland Executive is doing, mainly through 11 statutory committees (one for each government department). Each committee advises the Minister (who leads the department) on policy, budgets and laws. Committees can also initiate inquiries and new laws themselves.

The Northern Ireland Executive

12 of the 108 MLAs are in the Executive and include: the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and 10 Departmental Ministers (each in charge of a government department). They are responsible for Northern Ireland Executive funding expenditure, introducing new policies and running government departments such as Education, Culture, Arts & Leisure and Environment.



Amnesty International

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Planning a meeting

Decide who in your group will go to the meeting – preferably not more than three.

Decide on an agenda for the meeting, for example:

1. Introduce your group and the Student Action Network.
2. Explain AI's political impartiality.
3. Give some brief background information on the subject/campaign/prisoner you are there to talk about.
4. Ask your MP to take some form of action, for example, to: write to a foreign embassy or government; ask a parliamentary question; write to a Minister; sign an Early Day Motion; do press, publicity or a fundraising stunt with your group.
5. Ask for his/her thoughts and comments on what you have said and asked.

Before your meeting it is well worth rehearsing your arguments thoroughly and deciding which member of your group is handling which part of the agenda.

Prepare yourself for arguments which you might reasonably expect from the MP as to why s/he is unable to take the action you request and make sure that you give the MP good reasons for taking up your concern.

At the meeting

- Dress to impress
- Be punctual and polite
- Ask for copies of any letters, responses, parliamentary questions, on the subject to be sent to you.

Follow up

Write and thank the MP for the meeting.

Follow up the actions, which the MP agreed to take.

If you have any ideas on how to lobby your MP which we could add to this leaflet then please contact:

Education and Student Team
Human Rights Action Centre
17-25 New Inn Yard
London
EC2A 3EA
Tel: 020 7033 1596
Email: student@amnesty.org.uk