



Here are some tips on how to engage with your local federal representatives, both MPs and Senators. It is written in relation to meeting your MP but information is applicable to meeting a Senator.

Given their busy schedule, securing a meeting with your local representative can be quite a challenge. How do you convince their personal assistant to put you in the diary? And once you are in there, what can you do to get the most out of your meeting? Here are some suggestions.

Identifying and connecting with your representative:

- To identify your member of Parliament, you can locate them through the Parliament of Australia website - www.aph.gov.au/Senators_and_Members.
- You can connect with your representative 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

Securing a meeting

Put it in writing.

Always request a meeting in writing. If you call first, most MP's offices will ask that you put your request to them in an email or letter. It doesn't need to be long, simply outline who you are, including you are in their electorate if visiting an MP, the people who will be joining you and outline issue you wish to discuss. This should not be a summary of all of your arguments, just one or two sentences or dot points so they have some idea what to expect. Try to get your point across quickly and make the email short and persuasive.

Make your request stand out

Have a compelling reason why your MP should meet you, such as you live in their electorate and are a member or Management Committee member of Justice for Refugees SA, make this clear. Provide all your contact details and ask the MP's office to get back to you. To demonstrate your strong interest in meeting with the MP, it is often a good idea to back up your written request with a telephone call. You can simply confirm that the office has received your request and indicate that you are looking forward to hearing back from them.

Be persistent

If you have not received a response to your request within ten days, telephone the office again and ask to speak with the MP's personal assistant or diary manager. If your request for a meeting is denied, don't give up. Many people secure meetings with their MP through sheer persistence.

Remember

It is important to remain friendly, polite and respectful and you will stand a great chance of eventually securing a meeting time. Track your communications with your member so that if you have to email and call several times, you can refer to the previous dates that you have communicated with their office. Saying that you've tried to contact them three or four times may just get their attention.

Be Prepared

Know your representative

It's important to be well prepared in order to get the most out of your meeting.

- Start by doing some background research, making sure you know how to pronounce their name and how you should address them.
- If you don't already know, make sure you find out which party your MP belongs to, whether they hold any position in that party, how long they have been in Parliament and whether they are a member of parliamentary committees.
- Try to find out what your MP's views are on refugee and asylum seeker issues and their party's policies on it. Do an online search of Hansard, the record of everything that is said in Parliament, using your MP's name and the issue you are meeting them about. Check to see if they spoke about the issue in their first speech in Parliament.
- For more information about Hansard and first speeches, go to [what happens in Parliament](#). Information on all Members and Senators is also available from the [Australian Parliament House website](#).
- Many MPs have their own websites and some even have their own blog! Know your issue Research your issue.

Know your topic

- *No-one expects you to have an encyclopaedic knowledge of refugee and asylum seeker issues, just make sure you have a good understanding of it and are up-to-date with any media or community campaigns on the issue.*
- Be confident about what you do know and offer to get back to them on anything you don't. Saying 'I don't know' is always better than making points you can't back up. Make sure to follow up with them after the meeting on any questions you weren't sure about the answer.
- The most important reason for meeting with you MP is simply that you care about the issue. It's good to be prepared but you don't need to be an expert.
- Offshore detention costings can be complicated, as different calculations are used. Please see below for clarity.

What is your ask

Important to work out before your meeting what action you will ask your MP to take. This will depend on which party the MP belongs to, whether they hold any other positions and what their views are on the issue.

Making the most out of the meeting

It is likely that you will only have a short amount of time to discuss your issue, so it is important to be clear and concise in what you are asking for. (As a guide 30 minutes is a common appointment length – but this should always be clarified so that best use is made of whatever available time you have).

Team up

- If you know other people who, organise a small team to attend the meeting. This will give you some moral support and back-up.
- If possible, invite someone with personal lived experience to join you, however you must ensure they are comfortable in opening up and speaking about their experiences. This gives MPs the opportunity to hear first-hand from individuals and humanises the facts and experience
- If you want you can organise representatives from other groups who support your position. This will help to show your MP that the issue has wider community support.
- While it's good to take a small team, don't try to bring too many people. Three/four is ideal. Remember that if you are bringing additional people, you need to let the MPs office know before the meeting.
- Plan who will say what and choose someone to lead the conversation with the MP. That person will 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.

Be organised

Giving your MP a brief document outlining your key points and pertinent facts and figures can be an effective way to ensure that your message receives further consideration.

- Your MP may have an adviser or two with them, so you should take additional copies of any documents you plan to refer to. It may help to write a few notes for yourself, outlining your key arguments and other facts and figures you want to use.

Make a good first impression

Appearance shouldn't matter, but it does. Get off on the right foot by dressing appropriately and arriving on time. Looking smart and well-groomed gives a better first impression. Start by introducing yourself and thanking your MP for taking the time to meet with you. Remember to speak clearly and audibly and maintain good eye contact. It's great to be passionate, but balance this with politeness.

Listen

Your MP might be completely new to the issue, or they may have been working on it for years. If you are not able to access this information before your meeting, you will need to listen carefully to

how your MP responds to what you are saying. You should then tailor your message to your MP's level of knowledge.

- Clearly, if they have a good understanding of the issue, you can skip over the basic background information.
- In addition to how much they understand about the issue, you also need to know what your MP thinks about it. This will help you to respond to any misconceptions or false information they may have. You can also use knowledge of their views to help make your argument relevant to the way they understand the world.
- Listening carefully may also help you to gain valuable insights into the political process.

Your representative may disagree with what you're saying though even once you've stated both your positions and spoken about the issue.

That can be frustrating but remember to be respectful!

- Try to switch tactics or explain your direct experience with the issue and why it is so important.
- However some representatives will be closed to the issue, and be going through the motions. It is unfortunate but the best option is to remain respectful and calm, and recognise that at this time it is **best to listen and learn** more about the representative.
- *Do not become argumentative or angry.* Once the time is appropriate wrap up the meeting and thank them for meeting with you.
- Don't feel intimidated by going to see your representatives, even if they may disagree. MP/Senators who have agreed to meet with you will be friendly and polite.

Know exactly what you want

- Tell the politician exactly what you want him or her to do.
- Be brief and to the point.
- Give the MP compelling reasons to take the action you are requesting.
- Demonstrate that taking such action is in their best interests. Demonstrating that there is electoral support for your cause is an important first step. The more support you can show, the more likely they'll think of the issue as a vote-changing issue.
- Think of other benefits that you may be able to point to. Is there a chance of local media coverage, or the opportunity to speak at an upcoming rally?

Secure a commitment

- Once you've spelt out what you are asking for, seek a commitment from your MP. Ask them what they are going to do as a result of your visit and when. Ask them to inform you when they have taken action.
- Your MP may try to refer your concern to another MP who has greater responsibility in the area. If this occurs, gently, but firmly, remind your MP that, as a member of their electorate, you would like their involvement.
- Even if your MP does not support your position, being asked to justify their differing view is a valuable and fundamental part of the democratic process.

Leave a lasting impact

- When the meeting has come to an end – and regardless of how successful it has been – take the time to once again thank your MP for meeting with you.
- Ask for the business cards of any advisers present at the meeting.
- Indicate that you appreciate their time and would be happy to meet with them again at any stage in the future.
- Get a photo with the MP that you can share on social media and send to the MP in a thank you email/letter later.

Debrief

- After go for a coffee and talk over the how the meeting went with your team.
- Discuss what worked, what didn't, and how you could do it better next time.
- Make a note of any points to keep in mind for your next visit. Your experience and your better understanding of the politician will make the next meeting easier.
- Go over your notes of the meeting, paying attention to any commitments that were made by the MP, or any commitment that you may have made to provide further information.
- Work out who will be responsible for any follow up actions.

Follow up

Send a follow up letter or email to the MP. Thank them for meeting with you, outline your understanding of any actions they committed to take and indicate that you look forward to hearing from them. Include any information you promised to send to the politician. Make sure your MP honours their commitments to you. If you don't hear anything within a month, give their office a call or write to ask them whether they have taken the action they committed to take. *Once again, persistence is the key.*