

How to Engage with Politicians

Notes from a Cycle Action Webinar – 28/06/2016

During the hour-long session, three politicians of various representational levels gave tips on how they (and others at their level) are most effectively engaged by any special interest group, and also what pitfalls to avoid.

Main Takeaway Points

- Make a joint / team proposal where possible.
- Make wide alliances to help with your submission.
- Be focused on your meeting agenda, have a plan and stick to it.
- Back up your proposal with good, in-depth research.
- Be as inclusive as possible, point out the widest possible benefits to the whole community.
- Have documents available to back up your meeting.
- Prioritise your wish list, make sure the important stuff is identified and tackled fully.
- Don't rant, don't lecture.
- Counter any negatives in your plan with overwhelming positives for all.
- Be prepared for counter-arguments.

Trevor Mallard - MP

Requesting a meeting:

Email is perhaps the best method to get an appointment, so the politician can be contacted but their office staff can be included in the communication, to make sure an appointment is made.

Whatever your proposal / request / presentation concerns, try and find other allied groups and make a joint approach to show broad support for your position. A one-on-one meeting may give the impression of a 'lone-wolf' zealot, but an approach by a small group, especially if they are representatives of different organisations, lends extra weight to your argument. A representation by 3 to 6 individuals is the ideal sort of number. Make sure that the makeup of this group of representatives is as local as possible.

Consider if the meeting would be best held in the politician's offices, in a neutral situation such as a café, or even be a site visit (with resulting photo opportunity).

Research the individual:

- Check any previous utterances on related subject matter by the politician.
- Find out who their advisors are and what position they have taken.
- Find out how the politician has previously conducted meetings on similar topics or with similar groups.
- Go armed with a bit of general off-topic chat to act as an ice-breaker.

Research the Subject:

- Have a clear and concise message to give, and (everyone) stay on message.
- Have a plan of how to present your case.
- Have handouts / notes – but only leave them behind if you feel you've fully explained their contents.
- Prepare for a range of outcomes and rank them from ideal to bare minimum requirement.
- Prepare likely counter-arguments and your responses to them.
- Do a role play or have a practice presentation.
- Don't back your politician into a corner or try to force an outcome on the spot.
- Equally, don't confuse politeness with agreement (e.g. "Yes I understand," rather than "Yes I wholeheartedly agree.")

Timing:

Campaign time is not the time to try and win support for a new idea. The politician will be wanting to campaign on a selection of well-known and understood platforms so will have no time for something out of left-field. In between election years is the best time to get traction on new ideas.

Pippa Coom – Waitematā Local Board Member

Make your conversation mainstream, not a niche concern. Politicians want to back ideas where everyone feels like a winner.

- Don't talk about your own personal preferences (or express your proposal as being such).
- Do emphasise positive outcomes across the community, not just positives to cyclists.

Have evidence to back up your position

- Don't lecture with raw statistics
- Do have anecdotal introductions and real-life examples that can introduce the facts in a less threatening way.

Maintain the engagement

- Advocates are needed as ideas become projects and enter planning stages.
- Ensure that your presence is felt, and that you represent a significant number of people, to prevent positive outcomes from being derailed by 'squeaky wheel' loud complainers who might not have community support.

Non-specific contact.

At the local board level, as we've already found, it's perfectly acceptable to announce your presence with a formal or informal meeting with the board member(s). At higher levels of representation (according to Trever and David) it's better to have a specific and focused agenda. In any case it's a good idea to have a briefing document available to outline your overall aims and perhaps influence future thinking and your group's existence acknowledged.

Pippa considers it perfectly reasonable to canvas representatives for opinions on group interests.

David Lee – Wellington Councillor

Consider the use of social media to make initial contact and let your presence be known, but don't go into too much detail without meeting and building the relationship.

Be mindful of the politician's ego (they stood because they thought they could get enough votes, and they were right). Also consider that being winners themselves, they like to back winning ideas. Present arguments that they can buy into in that context.

Don't rant. Try to keep the message positive.

Business people (who are powerful lobbyist allies of councillors) have very narrow focus of concerns, and they are usually topped by provision of parking spaces. The presentation of any proposal must include a positive outcome to match any perceived negatives, such as losing a few parking spaces.

Arrange your argument so that it provides positives to all, across the community.

Take the time to build alliances with the community at large and where possible with other groups who would likely benefit from your proposal. The wider ownership any idea has, the more likely it is to receive the backing of any politician.