

'How to...' – a campaigning guide for foster carers

How to find out who your MP is

If you don't already know you can find out who your MP is by checking the www.theyworkforyou.com or www.parliament.uk website. Simply type in your postcode and it will tell you which constituency you're in and who the MP is. They will also provide useful information including biographies and details of the MP's website. Alternatively, you can telephone the House of Commons Information Office on 020 7219 4272, who will be happy to help.

How to write to or email your MP

You can write to your MP either at their constituency office or Parliament. You will be able to find their constituency address either from their website or Yellow Pages. The address for parliament is House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA. Not all MPs will have an office in their constituency.

All post will eventually end up with the correct member of staff to deal with the query but if you are wanting the MP to try to help with a problem that specifically relates to you it would be better to send it to the constituency office who is likely to deal with casework. If it is regarding a more general matter of government policy towards foster carers it would be best sent to Parliamentary address. MPs are expected to respond to all letters from their constituents and many will not respond unless you live in their constituency, so don't forget to put your address on it. Don't write directly to the Prime Minister or Secretary of State unless they are your local MP as they won't ever see the letter!

If you are using a template letter for a Fostering Network campaign, it often helps to briefly add an explanation of your relevant personal experiences, to differentiate it from other 'standard letters' an MP receives. However please remember to keep your letters as concise as possible, preferably one or maybe two sides.

To contact an MP by email visit the MP's personal website or www.theyworkforyou.com to find the recommended email address to use. Alternatively most MPs have a parliamentary email address in the form surnamefirstinitial@parliament.uk (eg. bloggsj@parliament.uk), however it is worth noting that some MPs may have a slight variation on this or they may prefer to keep this address for internal use only. You can also use the 'email your MP' service through the Parliament website www.parliament.uk.

How you can meet with your MP

There are three main ways that you can get to meet with your MP:

- make an appointment to meet them
- visit a constituency surgery

- green card them at Parliament.

It is much more effective to make a prior appointment or visit a surgery, as you are then guaranteed a meeting. People who turn up at Parliament to green card their MPs often leave disappointed if they are not there.

Making an appointment to meet your MP

The easiest way of making an appointment is simply to call up the constituency office (or the Parliamentary Office if you want to meet them at Westminster). You can also arrange a meeting via post or email but as MPs receive piles of letters, you may not get a response as quickly as you may like. Simply ask to speak to the MP's diary secretary, explain to them that you are a constituent and you would like to meet with the MP, and briefly explain the reason for the meeting. Plan ahead as MPs' diaries get busy far in advance. When Parliament is sitting MPs are likely to be based in Westminster from Monday through to Friday morning when they will return to their constituencies and hold surgeries on Friday and Saturdays.

Visit a constituency surgery

Almost all MPs hold regular constituency surgeries, usually weekly or fortnightly, where they meet with constituents to discuss their problems. Every MP does things slightly differently - some hold surgeries at their office, others in public buildings or occasionally some have roving surgeries in public places. Some MPs' surgeries are by appointment whilst others are first come, first served. Check the MP's website for details of arrangements in your area.

Green carding your MP

Turn up at the Houses of Parliament, go to St Stephen's Entrance and ask to go to the Central Lobby to green card the MP for your constituency. Go to the reception desk in Central Lobby and ask for a green card. Fill in your name, address, your MP and the purpose of the visit. They insist on having your address so they can check that you are visiting the MP who represents your constituency. It is essential that you give a clear reason for 'purpose of visit'. This is because if the MP is unable to meet you on the day, they have to write to you at the address provided, to respond to your query.

Once you have filled in the card and handed it back, staff will go and physically search for your MP. If your MP is found and comes to Central Lobby, your name will be announced over the loudspeaker. It's usually difficult to find the MP, so if the MP has not turned up within 40 minutes, it's unlikely they're going to show at all.

How to contact your councillor

Similar principles apply to contacting councillors as to contacting MPs. The best way to find your councillor's details is through your local authority website that should contain the most appropriate contact details. The level of activity of councillors varies dramatically but most will either hold surgeries or be able to meet with you to discuss your issues. They will also be able to put pressure on the lead member for children's services.

How to effectively lobby your MP

In order to get the most out of your meeting with your MP (or Councillor), it is important to prepare effectively. Here are some helpful tips:

Before the meeting

- **Contact the Fostering Network** – the policy and campaigns team have considerable experience of working with MPs and will be happy to give you advice and provide information to help support your case. Contact Adam Hug on 020 7620 6434 adam.hug@fostering.net.
- **Know your MP's history** - it makes sense to research whether they have an interest in children's issues and any prior experience of fostering issues. The Fostering Network can advise and information is available on www.theyworkforyou.com and www.parliament.uk.
- **Be clear what you want to talk to them about** - even if you're visiting your MP to discuss a national fostering issue, it's always important to make sure that you clearly make the link to how it affects you as his or her constituents. If you're lobbying on a specific campaign issue, the Fostering Network will have briefings available online to provide useful information and campaign aims. If you're worried that you'll forget the points you want to make, have a crib sheet of your two or three main points written down and take them with you to the meeting. Be specific about what you want the MP to do for you. Do you want them to write to the relevant minister? Sign an Early Day Motion? Put in some parliamentary questions? Approach your local councillors or Fostering Service? If you're not sure what they could do, ask them.

During the meeting

- **Be punctual** – MPs are busy people and if you are late you may not get to see them at all. When you arrive ask how much time is available.
- **Be organised** – if you are meeting with your MP with other foster carers, have a role for each visitor and tell the MP who is coming. It is advisable that one person should take notes.
- **Be positive** – MPs are more likely to listen sympathetically to your issues if you talk positively about the good things you can do as foster carer as well as the problems that you face.
- **Give them something to read** – offer the MP something in writing, outlining the points you have made. Alternatively provide the MP with Fostering Network campaign materials or policy papers that lay out the key issues. If the information is not to hand send after the meeting.
- **Don't make it up as you go along** – if something comes up that you weren't prepared for, just tell them that you'll get back to them later.
- **Be respectful** – always be polite and tolerant of differing views. The MP may not fully understand the issue or see things in a different way, so don't prevent the opportunity to work with them on other issues.
- **Tell the Fostering Network** - after the meeting let the Fostering Network know how the meeting went and what the MP has agreed to do on your behalf, so we can contact them about our campaigns.

How to 'Adopt an MP'

One of the most useful things that you can do is invite your MP to meet with your foster care association. This will provide an opportunity to raise your MP's awareness of what fostering is and what the major issues facing foster carers are. Such a meeting would have to be carefully managed and take place on a Friday or Saturday to enable the MP to attend.

Be careful not to use the meeting as an opportunity to have an extended winge but in a structured way talk about why you foster, the difficulties faced by many of the young people you look after and some of the practical problems of fostering tied to a few selected campaigning requests. The aim would be to develop the relationship between the FCA and the MP over the long-term.

How to engage the media

While this may not be a suitable option for many foster carers, working with the press can be a very useful way of building support for a campaign. Your local paper could be an important resource for awareness raising about key issues, but there are significant difficulties around the relationship with the local authority and how coverage would affect the children in your care that would need to be looked at before proceeding. If you feel that you have a case that would benefit from media coverage either locally or nationally, please contact Adam Hug or the Fostering Network press team on media@fostering.net or 020 7620 6416.