Virtual Lobbying Guide

Talking to your MP about climate change from home

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Hope for the Future (HFTF) exists to support you to build an effective relationship with your elected representatives in order to encourage them to take action on climate change. We deliver and develop training and resources on how to have effective and compassionate conversations with MPs about climate change.

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented changes to the everyday workings of Parliament and public contact with decision-makers. Parliament has been run virtually, with MPs voting via an internet platform, as well as conducting committees and even House of Commons debates via video link. This virtual parliament means that many MPs have been based entirely in their constituency. For some MP offices, casework has sky-rocketed as a result of Covid-19. But the changes have also meant that some MPs have more capacity for conversations with constituents about other issues that concern them.

As the UK government begins to draw up plans for recovery from Covid-19, and some of the most polluting industries (oil and aviation in particular) continue to lobby the government for unconditional bailouts, it is increasingly important that citizens are contacting their elected representatives to make the public support for a green recovery clear.

At HFTF, our advice is that multiple conversations over time are the most effective in building a working relationship with your MP. Arranging an initial conversation for 20 minutes to understand your MP’s perspective on climate change and related issues – even though Parliamentary or local action may not yet be possible or appropriate – is a good way to get started. One constituent told us how a Zoom call with their MP at the beginning of lockdown “offered immediacy and much better communication” than another conversation they had previously.

This guide outlines the process of virtually lobbying your MP, with tips on how to have a good conversation, templates for letters to get in touch with your MP, and other information to help you get creative. Once you have read through the guide, and are ready to put it into action, get in touch with us to get started at info@hftf.org.uk.
Is now a good time?
We’ve been in touch with MP offices across the country to ask how they are dealing with meeting requests. We found that over 70% of offices had either held video meetings with constituents already or had/would soon have the ability to do so if requested by a constituent.

One North West MP had contacted everyone booked in for a surgery appointment, offering them a chat by Zoom or on the phone. Another, in South Wales, had advertised virtual surgeries on her Facebook page, and was keen for people to get in touch with both casework and campaigning issues.

You can read more in our blog post about the findings of our MP availability survey.

Writing to your MP

Requesting a meeting
You can request a meeting by emailing your MP. You can find an example letter template at the end of this guide. We can help you personalise this template and give you advice on how to send it to your MP - you can get in touch via email or through our website contact form.

Make sure you acknowledge the pressure that MPs are under at this time. Many MPs will have an increased caseload as constituents and local businesses contact them about the effects of Covid-19, and their staff team will likely still be adapting to home-working arrangements.

Before you contact them, try to find out what platforms they are using to talk to constituents - their website or social media will probably have information on this, but if it’s not clear you can just ask in your email.

If you find that your MP isn’t back to holding meetings with their constituents yet, you might consider writing a letter to thank them instead. Thanking your MP is a great way to initiate or continue building a positive relationship with them, especially in the current context of the Covid-19 crisis. You can find out more about why this is important and how to go about it in our Thank Your MP letter template.
4 steps to prepare for your conversation

1) Check the tech.
Our survey found that different MPs used different meeting technologies. The most common was Zoom, however some were using Skype, Microsoft Teams, FaceTime, and even WhatsApp. Don’t let the technology put you off, our team has extensive experience with all these communication methods and will be happy to offer any advice should you need it. You may find that a video call with your MP won’t work. A phone call is generally available if a video call isn’t an option, and we’d highly recommend this as a second choice. However, different MPs will choose different ways of working and we must respect this - it may be that some MPs are choosing not to take such requests to talk with constituents.

2) Choose your focus.
In a short meeting with your MP it is best to focus on one specific topic, as there won’t be time to talk about more than that in any detail. What is the climate issue you’d like to raise with them? Is it local air pollution, or improving active transport infrastructure, or improving housing efficiency. Think about how you can find common ground with your MP on that issue – this could be in the health benefits of the above examples.
3) Think about framing.
Think about your focus in terms of values your MP already holds. For example, if you raise COP26, think about what makes COP26 of interest to your MP – some MPs will be motivated by the diplomacy aspect, and the UK being able to exhibit ‘soft power’ and lead the way with the technological and scientific expertise which the climate crisis requires. Other MPs will be motivated by the concept of working towards a ‘just transition’, and pursuing policies of ‘climate justice’. Framing your subject matter can be difficult, and again we are on hand to research your MP and suggest the best ways to frame what you want to talk about – just drop us an email at info@hftf.org.uk.

4) Set your ‘asks’.
You also need to prepare what you are going to ask your MP to do. What you ask needs to be realistic and it also needs to take into account the starting point of your MP. An MP with little previous demonstrable interest or expertise should be presented with ‘asks’ that aren’t quite as ambitious as for an MP who is a dedicated campaigner in this area.

When meeting your MP it is important to have a ‘SMART ask’ ready. This is an ask which is:

- **Specific**
- **Measurable**
- **Achievable**
- **Realistic**
- **Timely**

This can be challenging, so the What to ask your MP section below gives you some suggestions. Our suggestions are applicable to most MPs across the country, but we find that the most successful ‘asks’ are grounded in the local area, so we advise that you get in touch with us for advice on making them specific to your MP. Please don’t hesitate to get in touch at info@hftf.org.uk for this further guidance.

*Note: Be aware that your MP might still be overwhelmed with responding to Covid-19. In which case, you can arrange to get back in touch at a later date, if that would be more appropriate.*
What to ask your MP

1) Tackling pollution post-Covid
Many sectors of the economy are struggling because of Covid-19, with companies and industries in need of large government-backed bailouts to survive the crisis. However, unconditional government bailouts risk allowing environmentally harmful sectors to continue to pollute during and after this crisis. For instance, air travel currently accounts for around 6% of total UK greenhouse gas emissions, but is on course to rise to 25% by 2050, (Aviation Environment Federation and the Committee on Climate Change). Some European countries, including France, have bailed out their airlines but attached environmental terms and conditions, such as cutting carbon emissions from internal flights by 24% and investment in energy efficient fuels.

Potential Ask: You could ask your MP if they will table an oral question in the House of Commons on adding environmental conditions to bailouts for highly polluting industries

2) Supporting the Green Economy
Whilst many large polluting businesses face difficulties, there is an opportunity to get the economy moving again through investment in green industries with a wide range of other benefits. Around 20% of emissions come from road transport, with around 15% from heating homes (Office For National Statistics and the UK Government). These problems can easily and quickly be solved by improving wider investment in electric vehicles and home insulation, which would tackle air pollution and lower people’s energy bills.

Potential Ask: You could write a letter setting out the importance of investing in the green economy - e.g. in electric vehicles and retrofitting homes - and ask your MP to deliver it to the Treasury (who are required to write a response).

3) COP26
The UK is responsible for hosting the next annual world climate summit, COP26, now postponed by a year to November 2021 due to Covid-19. This year is especially important, as almost every country in the world must set carbon reduction targets for the next five to ten years. These carbon reduction targets are called ‘Nationally Determined Contributions’ - or NDC’s. However, the UK is behind schedule to submit its own NDC. It is important that the UK - as the host of COP26 - sets a positive example, with binding climate and environment targets which are ambitious.

Potential Ask: You could ask your MP to request a backbench debate on submitting an ambitious and timely NDC in preparation for the COP26 summit.
Tips for meeting with your MP

- Find a quiet place as you can for your call, so that you can hear each other as well as possible. However, don’t worry if that’s not possible - many MPs will also be juggling child-care and adjusting to working from home, so they will understand.

- You can expect to have a 20 minute meeting with your MP (though this does vary between MPs), so don’t expect to cover a lot of ground. An initial meeting is a great opportunity to meet your MP and ask them questions to find out more about their interests. Knowing more about them helps you to tailor what you ask of them in future meetings.

- An initial meeting with your MP need not be ‘perfect’ and have immediate results. View it as a great opportunity to simply have a first conversation and express your concerns and willingness to help your MP to engage further with climate policy. If you want to continue building your relationship with them, perhaps express that you are keen to meet again to talk through how they can advocate for a green recovery and better climate policy.

- If you feel that you would like to have support during the meeting, a member of the Hope for the Future team can dial in to the video call with you. Just get in touch to let us know if this would be helpful.

After the meeting

Follow-up.
Email us to feed back on your experience, and discuss how to take your engagement further. Contact your MP to thank them, and recap what was agreed at the meeting. Well done for taking action on climate change with your MP.
Letter Template

Address and date

Dear [Name] MP,

Meeting Request: [the main focus of the conversation]

Begin your letter by thanking your MP, and sensitively acknowledging the current context of coronavirus.

E.g. Thank you for your continued hard work representing Sheffield Hallam, especially during a time such as this. I know your current focus will be supporting those most affected in our area, and continuing your Parliamentary work as far as possible. I know I join with many others in my appreciation of all the work you and your team do.

Introduce yourself. In one sentence introduce the topic and explain why you/your group is interested or involved. Mention in this opening paragraph what you are asking for your MP to do in response to this letter.

E.g. I am writing to you because I am concerned that UK policy to adapt to climate change is behind where it needs to be. I am a parent to two children, and I want them to have the best possible future. Like the current health crisis, climate change requires us to manage risk well, and plan proactively for changes in climate which are being well-monitored.

E.g. I am writing as a teacher concerned about the effects of climate change in our own area, and internationally. It’s a subject area my students are increasingly concerned about. I understand that this is a strange time, and I would be grateful to talk with you at a time that is convenient about inviting you to a workshop on the topic of climate change in the next academic year.

E.g. We are writing to you from St Peter’s church, about our community’s concern about the effects of climate change in our own area, and in the church communities we support overseas. As a church we are working to assess our own environmental impact as part of wider national efforts to reduce the UK’s carbon emissions. We would like to talk with you to discuss what we are doing locally, and how we can help you to support the success of COP26 when it is held in November 2021.
It’s good to recognise the work your MP has already done in this area. Most MPs will have done something – even if only small. Make this as specific as possible. Finding this hard? Email us!

E.g. We know the Conservative party have been a crucial part of work the UK has done so far in tackling climate change – especially in the work to transform the mix of the UK power sector, and in passing the ambitious Net Zero legislation last June.

E.g. We know you have already been working hard on our behalf and we really appreciate Labour’s recent focus on climate change and its innovative approach to policy in this area. Thank you - in particular - for the way you championed this issue in your election campaign and for speaking on renewable energy and COP26 in Parliament.

Talk about your specific context here. This could be about issues that particularly affect the local area, or personal details about your own context. For example, what action have you taken and what first got you involved? You could quote from someone who has inspired you, or mention expected events within the next year on this issue. You could talk about ways in which you feel climate change affects your community and area directly. This doesn’t need to be long!

E.g. As a family, we watched the David Attenborough TV series, and it is something my children regularly talk about. I believe it is especially important to engage with climate change given that our area is so prone to flooding.

E.g. I first became interested in this area after the 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report was published. I have since helped the office I work in create an environmental policy and I have followed the ‘citizen’s assembly’ being held in Birmingham with interest. I am looking forward to the UN climate talks being hosted by the UK next year.

E.g. I have noticed that air pollution locally has drastically reduced during the Covid-19 lockdown and resulting drastic reduction in car and air travel. I have also watched with interest as cities such as Madrid have introduced policies that encourage far more active travel such as cycling and walking in response to this.

Finish off the letter highlighting the importance of climate change to you and requesting to discuss these matters.

E.g. At a busy and uncertain time, we would be delighted if you were available to have a conversation over the phone or video link to discuss your thoughts on implementing policy in this area, and what changes you would like to see in the local area – especially ahead of the UK hosting the UN climate talks - COP26 - in November 2021.

Please can you let me know when it would be convenient to discuss this with you?

Yours sincerely,

[Signature - with your postcode and your preferred contact details]