Scheduling your meeting

Time your request for the greatest impact

Identify when your issue is likely to be discussed in parliament (or when your target is likely to be able to deliver your ask). Remember, it is always easier to impact policy decisions before they are made, rather than after.

Politicians are likely to be influenced by media and increased public discussion and debate. It is helpful if you are able to schedule your meeting during or ahead of periods of peak public interest.

Politicians are also far more receptive during election periods, although they may also be far busier. If you can schedule your meeting in the lead-up to relevant elections, this will give you a good chance of success, especially if your delegation includes a good cross-section of your community.

In order to give yourself the best chance of getting a meeting when you want it, schedule it with plenty of time. Generally, try to request a meeting about two months before the ideal meeting date. It’s easier to get your preferred meeting date and to book in advance with state MPs, and more difficult with federal MPs. Do not attempt to schedule a meeting when parliament is sitting.

Take the right people with you

Most MP offices will ask the names of those attending when scheduling the meeting, to confirm they are local constituents. They’ll ask you for this in advance, and may not agree to a meeting until you provide it, so it’s best you confirm the people you’ll be bringing well in advance.

Here are some guidelines to help you form an effective advocacy group:

First, it is much better to go in a group, rather than by yourself. Going in as a group gives you a greater chance of being taken seriously, listened to, and seen to represent a significant section of the community. Having too many participants at a meeting can be just as damaging. It means there is a risk of too many viewpoints confusing the issue, the MP feeling like they are being ‘ganged up on’, etc. The ideal number of attendees is between three and six.

Next, consider which supporters would best represent your issue. Your aim in selecting your group members is to ascertain who will help you deliver a compelling story in a structured way, and who will help demonstrate that your issue is supported by people across all sectors of the MP’s community.

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Requesting your meeting

Request a meeting with the best person

You can always seek meetings with MPs that are outside your own area, but you will have less success and will need to provide compelling reasons why the MP should meet with you. Also consider whether there is a senator worth meeting that represents your local area. Sometimes, you may be invited to speak to another member of staff. Do not underestimate their influence. Approach these meetings exactly as you would when meeting with an MP.

To find your State or Federal contact details please refer to the Resources page at the back of this document.

Befriend the diary manager

MPs rarely, if ever, manage their own diaries. Either their personal assistant (PA) or a dedicated Diary Manager will be responsible for scheduling. Sometimes, they will check with the MP—but, on many occasions, they manage the diary at their own discretion.

Whether you’re on the phone, in the office or writing in, always treat the PA courteously, even if they’re difficult to deal with. If you find yourself on a first name basis with an MP’s Diary Manager, you may find yourself getting more positive responses to your requests.

Keep your request factual and concise

Your request does not need to be a lengthy argument about why your issue is important or why your MP should meet with you. Think of it more as a statement of facts. You will need to say who you are, where you live, why you want to meet with them, who else will be attending the meeting, and include a VERY basic outline of what you would like to discuss. This outline should be no more than two to three sentences or dot points. Ensure you focus on any information that is likely to be new or directly relevant to the MP with whom you are requesting a meeting.

Give yourself the best chance of success by providing compelling reasons why the MP should be interested in meeting with you.

Some examples:

• You live in their electorate.
• You are representing a group or organisation that has relevance to them or their electorate.
• The issue has potential to impact their electorate directly.
• Your group has strong representation in the MP’s electorate.
• You are about to start some work in the area.

Choose a reason that demonstrates that your issue is not only important but important to your targeted MP and their community.

For more information on writing to Ministers or the Prime Minister, contact BirdLife Australia’s National Office.

Make your request in multiple formats

Start the process with a phone call. If nothing else, this should tell you who manages the MP’s diary and thus, who you need to contact directly. If you are lucky enough to speak to the Diary Manager on the phone, make a point of being friendly with them.

Submit your request in writing via email as soon as possible after the initial phone call. You want the Diary Manager to remember you and the conversation you had over the phone. If you spoke about something specific, refer to it in the email.

Be persistent

If you haven’t received a reply to your request within 10 days, you need to follow up with a call to the MP’s office. Ask to speak to the Diary Manager directly. Remember that this person is your foot in the door, so always maintain a pleasant demeanour and be respectful.

Below: Community groups working to defend and protect extraordinary birdlife and biodiversity: BirdLife Goldfields branch and at the BirdLife Network Forum 2017. Tanya Loos, Fiona Bilanoford

Cover: South-Eastern Red-Tailed Black-Cockatoos catching up for a drink. These beautiful birds are Critically Endangered and should be protected but continue to be impacted by deforestation. Rick Dawson
Preparing for your meeting

Get to know your MP

MPs are people, just like you. They have interests and values, and there are certain ways of framing a discussion that will appeal to one individual more than another. The more you know about your MP, the better you will be able to tailor your case and your ask.

Try to find answers to the following questions:

- What party does the MP belong to and what is the party position on your issue?
- Do they hold any position in government or on the shadow front bench which is relevant to your issue/ask, or could be used for leverage/influence?
- What are their values and why did they get into politics?
- What are their biggest concerns for the community they represent?
- What have they said on record? (Looking at their initial parliamentary address is a good place to start).
- What causes do they support?
- What are their interests outside of parliament?
- What are their views on key issues related to the issue you want to discuss?
- Are they a member of any parliamentary committees or working groups?
- Are they in a safe or marginal seat?

You will need to do some research. You can, of course, use Google to search for key terms along with your MP’s name. You can also look at your State’s parliamentary website or your MP’s personal website, if they have one.

Many MPs are active on social media, and if you follow their accounts you will learn a lot about them and the issues they consider to be important. You can also look at speeches they have made in parliament by checking out the Hansard Records on your State’s parliamentary website. To find your State or Federal Hansard Records please refer to the Resources page at the back of this document. Finally, there are a few independent websites which offer profiles of the policy positions of members of parliament, such as They Vote For You and Open Australia.

You don’t want to waste your MP’s time by asking for a commitment or explanation that has already been made public. Check the Government’s website and recent news articles on the issue to double-check you know what the Government and/or your target MP has been saying already.

Also ensure you know how to pronounce your MP’s name correctly, and how to address them.

NB: Your MP will usually bring another member of staff into the meeting with them.

Say what you want to say

Always aim to be clear and concise.

Generally, there are five key components that should be considered and allowed for at any meeting with an MP:

1. Welcome and introductions
2. Make your case
3. Discuss the issue
4. Make your ask
5. Wrap up and confirm commitments

Only go into a meeting to discuss one issue. Do not use more than three case studies or stories to support your position.

A few key statistics are good to have up your sleeve, but remember that these statistics should be relevant to the MP specifically and should support your argument and case studies/stories. Rarely will statistics alone achieve the commitment you’re after. Personal stories from constituents are far more likely to get the job done. Often, photos that demonstrate your case can be helpful. Ideally, these should be used to complement personal stories.

After you have researched your MP, you might feel like you know their position on your issue. Never assume this to be the case and always ask your MP their views on the issue you are raising and the case studies you use to highlight your point.

Prepare for your meeting as if your MP knows nothing about your issue.

Use your time well

You must prepare for your meeting based on the time you have been allocated. This will usually be 30 minutes, but can depend on the MP and their availability. Allow time for your MP to respond and for discussion, and be prepared for your meeting to be cut short - these things happen.
Preparing for your meeting

Get across your issue

Familiarising yourself with the issue allows you to be confident and comfortable, and avoid being railroaded or losing your cool if you are put under pressure by your MP. That said, you will not be expected to know everything there is to know about your issue. It’s fine to say you don’t know something or that you’ll get back to them. It is far more important to demonstrate that you and your community care than it is to demonstrate extensive knowledge of the issue.

Don’t assume the MP knows much about your issue, or even anything about birds and ecosystems. Pitch it at a very basic level, use proper English and do not use acronyms or abbreviations. You will quickly get a sense of whether you need to speak in more depth and you may need to adopt a higher-level tone.

Find out what the Government or MP has previously said/done on the issue. You can find this out by looking up the website of the relevant Government Department or giving them a call.

You also need to know what effect your issue has had on the community that the MP represents, or the likely impacts on that community. A broader knowledge of the issue can be helpful, but it’s the impact on and the feelings of the local community that will be most compelling to your MP.

Whilst you should avoid building your meeting around endless statistics and facts, they are important to know in case the MP asks you a question or challenges your position. Try to take two or three key facts and/or statistics into the meeting with you.

Familiarise yourself with common counterarguments and be equipped to deal with these in case they are raised in the meeting.

If you’re advocating as part of a national BirdLife campaign, you’ll be able to get info including how to explain the issue, what’s at stake and some case studies to prove it, and some example counterarguments. You might be able to use some visual materials provided by BirdLife Australia to illustrate your point - especially if you live in an area locally important to one of our case studies of threatened birds.

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Make a clear and realistic ask

It is vital that you are very clear and up-front about what you want them to do after the meeting, for example: to raise your issue with their party, and particularly including your local species.

Be clear on what you are asking and keep your MP accountable with clear deliverables and a scheduled follow up. Keep in mind that, in most cases, it’s unrealistic to expect them to change anything individually.

A good ask is for your MP to raise the issue at the next caucus meeting via Caucus Secretary (each party has an equivalent). Have the Caucus Secretary also confirm the meeting with a letter to the appropriate minister.

Whatever your ask, it must be something that the MP can actually achieve and it must be helpful for your issue. Depending on the issue, your MP and other factors, it may make sense to have two or three asks of your MP.

Take supporting materials with you

There are a few things that are important to take with you to your meeting, including a brief that summarises your case.

Your briefing document should explain the issue and detail who is being affected, what can be done to tackle the problem, what specific actions you are asking the MP to take, and your contact details for further correspondence.

It is usually best to hand the MP briefing documentation at the end of the meeting, rather than at the beginning. This is to avoid wasting the valuable time you have with them while they look through the material, and also a situation where they are half-listening and half-flicking through a document you have provided.

Remember, your MP will likely have an adviser or two with them. Take three to four copies of any resources you wish to give your MP, and also give them to any other staff present at the meeting.

Train for success

You don’t need formal training to have a successful meeting with your local MP, but running through the meeting a few times ahead of the day can make a big difference. About a week before your scheduled meeting, agree on your ask, what you’ll present and how, and your individual roles. Practise delivering your parts and answering tricky questions, make notes on what could be improved, and run through it again.

If you can get an ex-politician or someone familiar with this environment to play the role of the MP, this is helpful. Remember that you’re not just practising delivering facts, but developing relationships based on values and principles.

Photos and other collateral are also important to obtain and test with others.
At your meeting

If you have prepared well for your meeting, things should flow quite smoothly. Even so, there are a few key things to remember.

At your meeting
• First impressions count
• Give yourself plenty of time
• Behave like you’re making a friend
• Listen, listen, listen!

It is not uncommon in these meetings that you will learn things you didn’t know before. This may include information about roadblocks for your issue, the political processes, who supports your position, etc.

Equally importantly, by listening you will be able to gauge what level of understanding your MP has on your issue, and adjust your delivery accordingly.

For instance, if your MP shows a lot of interest in a particular case study or statistic, drill into it a little further. If they seem disinterested by others, do not go into too much detail. If an objection is raised or a question asked, address it immediately.

• Make a convincing ask:

The key to making your ask is to keep it clear and easily understood. Your MP needs to have absolutely no doubts about what it is you’re asking them to do.

If they commit to your ask, you need to thank them, ask them when they will do it and also to notify you once it’s done with an update on the outcome.

If they do not want to commit to your ask, ask them to justify their position.

Before you leave

There are a couple of things you need to check before you leave the meeting:

• Cover all of your key messages.
• Know when your MP will deliver, and how you will know that they have.
• Summarise the actions for each person coming out of the meeting, with associated timelines.
• Hand over your briefing document.
• Thank the MP and all staff present.
• Ask to take a photo.
• Ensure you have exchanged business cards with your MP AND all staff present. You can also give one to the Diary Manager on your way out.

After your meeting

Debrief

Sit down as a team to discuss the meeting as soon as possible after it is concluded. Ideally, this will happen directly after the meeting so it is fresh in people’s minds. You want to talk about what worked, what didn’t and what might be improved upon for the next meeting. You may also want to use this opportunity to create your follow up email, discuss any other follow up actions required and assign roles—for example, who will contact the MP and when.

Follow up

Send the MP a follow up email ASAP after the meeting concludes. This should not be more than 48 hours after the meeting.

First and foremost, thank the MP for their time and consideration. Make sure you have sent through any further information that was promised to the MP.

In this email, you should also remind the MP of any further information they committed to getting to you, as well as any other commitments they made at the meeting. Having these commitments down in writing is important, and will also help ensure that the MP knows this is something you expect delivery on, and will follow up as required.

Post on your MP’s social media accounts

You may not agree with your MP’s position on the issue you are discussing, but it is important to remember that your relationship with your MP is important and gives you power. Putting a comment on their Facebook page thanking them for meeting with you is rarely done, and should earn you some brownie points.

Stick to timelines

If you’ve presented your case well, and have participated in the meeting following the guidelines above, you will have given yourself a great chance of getting a commitment on your ask. You will have also attached timelines to this commitment. Make sure you set yourself a reminder to follow up on any commitments before the deadline.

If you do not receive a response within a week or by the newly-allocated deadline, you will need to follow up again.

Do not get impatient or frustrated. MPs are dealing with many issues at any given time, and there is every chance that, while your issue may be your top priority, it may not be theirs. If you remain politely persistent you will eventually get the promised action.

Keep your MP up-to-date

One thing that is often overlooked is tracking the development of an issue and its presence in the community and local media, and sharing this with your MP.

If they are genuinely engaged in your issue, this will be a valuable help for them and will keep them interested. It will also strengthen the relationship you have started to build.

Send these updates during times when there are significant developments or changes regarding your issue. Do not contact your MP with every article published on the issue.

Engage the local media

If you have captured strong quotes, have approval to use them and have taken a good picture, you may be able to engage local media through talk-back radio and letters to the editor, for example.

You should only do this if there is a strategic reason to do so, and you should always consider what impacts it will have on the relationship you are building with your MP.
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