



giving
nature
a home



Getting involved in planning in Northern Ireland: Involving politicians and the media

Your views are important because you are a member of your community. You can speak with local knowledge of the area and are most affected by changes to your local environment. Your voice can carry considerable weight.

When you are trying to protect the environment, the media and local councillors can be useful allies. Some of our suggestions are simple to do by yourself, others would be more suited to a group of interested people.

Why not talk to other people in your area, and find like-minded individuals so that you can work together. You could also consider contacting your local elected representatives if you are concerned about a threat to a wildlife site. There is no obligation for them to act on your behalf, but they are more likely to take action if the site is considered an important one, such as an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI), or has a clear value to your local community.

Involving local councils

In Northern Ireland there are 11 district council areas with limited duties for maintaining the quality of your local environment.

Visit district council website to find out more about local district councillors in your area or visit the Northern Ireland government website (www.northernireland.gov.uk).

If you do not have access to the Internet, you can find out who your local councillors are by visiting your local library, or telephoning your local district council. You can also find out any details of environment committees that are relevant to your concerns.

You can get your local council involved

Write to your local councillor, seeking his/her views, expressing your concerns and any possible solutions you have. Provide them with as much information as you can to back up your arguments.

Find out from a councillor what issues are likely to be discussed at the next committee meeting and make your representations. Arrange to meet the officer who will write the report for the council committee to discuss your concerns.

Involving local media

When planning your approach to working with the media, it is best to start by doing some research.

Do not underestimate the importance of local media – your most useful media contacts are likely to be local radio, particularly phone-in shows, and your local newspaper. You may even be able to get them to support your campaign.

It is very important to build and sustain profile. Planning a series of media activities and gaining regular coverage across a wide range of media will give your campaign prominence. Make sure you emphasise positive messages, do not just campaign on negatives.

Writing a press release

A press release is a useful tool for communicating your message to the media. It captures your story and tells the media how to get in touch to find out more.

A media release needs to contain the following information:

- What is the issue? What is your message?
- Where is the damage/change occurring?
- Why has this occurred? Why are you doing this?
- Who is doing this?
- When is this taking place? Are you having an event or meeting?
- How can others get involved?

Get the attention of the editor in the first paragraph, which should be no more than three short to medium length sentences. You can also get tips online by searching 'How to write effective media releases'.

Local press

The best way to get your concerns aired in a newspaper is by writing to, or e-mailing, the letters page. This is the second most read part of the newspaper after the front page.

For local newspapers, the address to write to is usually given on the letters page.

Tips for writing a letter to a newspaper editor:

- Read the letters page and absorb the style of the paper to enhance your chances of getting a letter printed.
- Keep your letter short (150 words maximum).
- Make just one or two central points and keep things clear and simple.
- Letters to local newspapers are more likely to be published if they refer to locally important issues, so try to use a local example to illustrate your points if you can.
- Point out that most issues which affect the environment are 'people and consumer' issues and do not affect wildlife alone.
- Address your letter 'To the Editor' and mark it 'For Publication'. Include a daytime telephone number so that you can be contacted. Newspapers will not usually print letters if only an e-mail address is supplied.

Social Media

It may be worthwhile using social media to get your message across effectively to a much wider audience.

Blogs, emails, Twitter and Facebook accounts are becoming increasingly important campaign tools. These tools offer the opportunity for instant updates and can be a very effective method of calling supporters to action. Social media, online maps, blogs and video or photo sharing sites can all be interlinked to offer a multimedia experience. New media offers you the chance to publish your own news as well as the opportunity to keep traditional media updated.

Good online media work demands short, precise and clear messages with clearly sign posted steps towards your desired outcome. The easier it is to support your action, the more likely people are to support you.

Radio

There are a number of local stations, but you can just as easily get onto a national station.

If you are planning to get onto a show, find out who the producers of the shows are and call them up. Send them the press release and offer to brief them. You will usually have about two minutes to sell the story when you call them up.

Getting the most from your interview:

- Check beforehand if the interview is going to be live, pre-recorded or 'as live'.
- Enquire about the questions you are likely to be asked.
- Find the best person for the interview.
- Rehearse in advance – say the words out loud.
- Plan your key message(s) (two or three maximum) in advance and don't allow the questioner to deflect you from what you want to get across.
- Prepare your response to any potentially difficult questions.
- Always assume the microphone is switched on!

Involving your MLA or MP

Your MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) represents you at the Northern Ireland Assembly. In addition to MLAs, an MP (Member of Parliament) represents the people of Northern Ireland in the House of Commons.

As a constituent, you are entitled to a response when you write to your MLA or MP or MEP (Member of European Parliament).

Contacting your MLA or MP to gain their support for an issue can be very useful. They can help provide pressure for action, influence decisions and gain publicity for an issue. A letter to your MP should request that they take some specific action on your behalf.

Your MLA or MP can take a number of actions on your behalf, including:

- Writing to Government Ministers to raise your concerns. If your MP writes to a Minister on your behalf they will receive a reply signed by the Minister; whereas if you sent a letter directly to a Minister, it will probably only be seen by a civil servant.
- Raising your issue for discussion at Stormont/Westminster.
- Raising issues during debates and tabling parliamentary questions to the Government.

Tips on making your letter effective:

- **Keep it short** as very long letters are less likely to be read.

- **Be polite.** The response that you get is likely to be more positive and helpful if your approach is a constructive one. If you have time, thank your MLA or MP for their reply. This will help to build a better relationship with them.
- **Use your own words.** You are likely to make a more significant impact on your MLA/MP if you express these points in your own words.
- **Give an example from your local area** that supports the points you have made. If you do not know of an example, do not worry – your letter will still have an impact.

Addressing your MP

Most MPs should be addressed using their name, followed by 'MP' or 'MLA', for example 'Joe Bloggs MP'. Then simply begin the letter 'Dear Mr Bloggs'.

The names, addresses and constituencies of MPs can be found by visiting www.theyworkforyou.com. In transboundary areas/cases the Houses of the Oireachtas website may be useful (www.oireachtas.ie/parliament/tdssenators/tds). The names of MLAs can be found on the Northern Ireland Assembly website (<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/your-mlas/>).

