

# HOW TO INFLUENCE THE DEBATE ON CITIZENS' RIGHTS

## *A practical guide to grassroots action*

As we move into 2018, we're also moving into a critical period for engaging with politicians and decision makers in both the UK and Europe, to ensure that our rights as British citizens in the EU27 are safeguarded post-Brexit. While British in Europe continues to run a high level and high profile advocacy campaign, there's much that can (and must) be done closer to the ground, at grassroots level, if we're to push home the message that citizens' rights have *not* yet been resolved and influence policy makers right across the board. If we're to succeed, it's equally important for us now to work to challenge some of the stereotypes of the 'British in Europe' that seem to face us everywhere we turn.

For many of us this is new terrain: it's not always evident how to go about it and it can be daunting if you're not sure how to take the first steps. To be effective, we need as many people as possible to take part, right across the EU27 – but we also need to make sure we target the right people and say the right things in the right ways.

Others may have been lobbying for many months now and are approaching 'lobby burn-out'. We include a way in which you can take a step back from the more traditional lobbying methods while continuing to take an active role in influencing the debate.

We want to make it as simple as possible for everyone to get involved in lobbying so that our politicians can better understand what the issues are and how strongly we feel about them. This guide takes a practical, 'how-to' approach to effective action and will help you make sure that your voice is heard above the clamour.

## **What's in this guide**

### TAKING ACTION TO INFLUENCE THE DEBATE – WHAT, WHY AND HOW?

1. What is lobbying?
2. Understanding how to influence – do's, don'ts, and avoiding the delete button.

### WAYS OF INFLUENCING

3. Joining in with organised British in Europe lobbying campaigns, and how they work.
4. Lobbying politicians independently.
5. Contacting members of the parliament of your country of residence.
6. Attending local embassy meetings.

### OUTSIDE THE BOX

7. From apathy to empathy - telling stories as a means of influencing.

## TAKING ACTION TO INFLUENCE THE DEBATE – WHAT, WHY AND HOW?

### 1. What is lobbying?

Put simply, lobbying is letting those who make decisions know what you think. At grassroots level, it's the involvement of ordinary citizens - like us - in trying to influence policy and legislation. If enough ordinary people raise strong concerns about a particular issue, it suggests to politicians that a failure to act is likely to have political or economic consequences. Much of the power of grassroots lobbying lies in numbers!

But simply bombarding decision makers with ill-thought out emails isn't constructive (and can actually be counter-productive).

To make your lobbying successful, you need to do three things:

- ✓ Highlight the **problem**
- ✓ Propose a **solution**
- ✓ Be clear what **action** you are asking the decision maker to take in response to your contact.

The first without the second is unlikely to make an impact; the second without the first is unlikely to make sense; and the first two without the third is unlikely to get a response!

For more about how to write effective lobbying emails and letters see section 2 below.

### *Can I be a lobbyist?*

Short answer: yes!

As a British citizen living in the EU, you're in a privileged position to be able to raise awareness amongst decision makers: you stand to be directly affected by the UK government's decision to leave the EU. Not only can you present the issues, but you can relate them to your day to day life as an ordinary person - and that's what will give your communications real directness and power.

Many of us already have been lobbyists in our working life or in volunteer work without even realising it. If you're a teacher who stands up for the interests of your students, you're a lobbyist. If you belong to a group of people affected by, say, a particular health condition, the chances are that you've spoken out at some point for your interests to be heard. Anyone who feels strongly about an issue which is negatively impacting on people's lives is qualified to be a lobbyist. There's no mystique, and no special skills required beyond being a concerned human being.

## 2. Understanding how to influence – do's, don'ts, and avoiding the delete button

MPs, peers, MEPs and other decision makers live in (as one MP put it) a 'twilight world of email tyranny'. It's never been easier for ordinary people like us to fire off emails, tweets and messages to our political representatives and other influencers ... yet paradoxically, that means it's actually *harder* to be properly heard amongst the clamour of competing demands for attention.

So to make sure that our message isn't lost among impossibly full inboxes and thousands of identical emails, grassroots lobbyists need to be savvy. The days of mass-mailshots are over: each of us needs to plan our campaign as carefully as we would if we were going into battle, and make the best use of the time and resources we're going to put into our lobbying.

### *The don'ts*

- ☹️ *Don't* send out standard template emails across the board – they've been really over-used in the last few years. If you're basing your email on a template supplied by British in Europe, make sure that you personalise it as much as you possibly can. It will take a bit longer but it'll be very much more effective, and you'll demonstrate that you've done more than simply copied, pasted and clicked a button. Don't forget that standard emails will get (at best) standard responses!
- ☹️ *Don't* use mass mail-out sites like Write To Them to generate your emails. Write your own email and send it directly from your own email address.
- ☹️ *Don't* use mass email programs such as MailChimp to send your emails.
- ☹️ *Don't* use your email to attack, antagonise, make personal criticism or try to persuade the recipient to do something by the force of your personality. You're not on the hustings.
- ☹️ *Don't* write over-long, over-flowery or over-complicated emails. Keep your writing style clear and straightforward, keep your email concise, and if you need to explain something complex, consider attaching it as a briefing paper or linking to a relevant page on, for example, the British in Europe website.
- ☹️ *Don't* expect an immediate reply. A couple of weeks is normal. Don't be discouraged or disheartened if you don't get a response - it certainly doesn't mean that your letter has been ignored. Remember that one of the goals of this kind of lobbying is education and awareness raising and you've almost certainly achieved that with or without a reply.
- ☹️ *Don't* waste time lobbying lost causes – for example, hard Brexiteers or those who are strongly anti-EU or of a far-right persuasion. This is not only a waste of time, it can actually be counter-productive and invite deliberately provocative responses. We're at the point in our campaign

where we need to focus our resources where they will be most effective, so follow British in Europe's guidance on who to target for individual campaigns.

### *The do's*

- ☺ *Do* address your recipient by name, and get it right! If you're emailing a peer, check the correct form of address too.
- ☺ *Do* include your address, and if you're contacting a politician in the UK, include your previous UK address as well (or that of a family member if you've been out of the country for many years).
- ☺ *Do* assume that the recipient knows nothing about the issues that you're raising – which for 'grassroots' politicians will almost always be the case, as they have a huge number of complicated subjects to try and understand at any one time. Make things easy for them by helping them to understand – this will also help to get them onside.
- ☺ *Do* your homework. A bit of research might help you tailor your approach to press the right buttons. Check out their voting record, whether they've ever rebelled against the party whip, whether they've ever spoken or asked questions on citizens' rights issues. This site will help you: <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/>
- ☺ *Do* finish your email with a clear request for a specific action. It might sound obvious, but it's really important to **identify** the problem that you are trying to solve and then **specify** a way on which it can be solved (British in Europe's publications take a solution-focused approach so you can use these as a base). Research shows that politicians like to support campaigns that offer well-specified, practical solutions to particular issues, and similarly dislike campaigns with ill-defined objectives along with those that simply ask them to prioritise a broad issue.
- ☺ *Do* make it clear **how** the recipient can offer their support. This might include signing a pledge, writing to a relevant minister, tabling a written question, lobbying inside their own parties or groups, raising the issue or speaking on it in a particular debate, supporting an amendment to a bill, taking up an issue with a Select Committee or All Party Parliamentary Group, or even hosting a specific meeting themselves. Give them something to do and there's a chance that they'll do it!
- ☺ *Do* remember that you're just one correspondent, raising one issue. Your recipient isn't super-human and has a limited amount of time and resources – which means they'll have to pick and choose which issues they support. If they're elected politicians they also always have at least one eye on their profile, their popularity and their prospects of re-election! So to make your request for support mutually beneficial, try thinking what you might be able to offer in return: for example, retweeting a message of support, posting positively on their Facebook page or

adding their name to a publicly hosted list of pledgers.

- 😊 Do remember to thank your correspondent for any response that you get; even if it's not the one that you hoped for they have at least taken the time to reply.

## WAYS OF INFLUENCING

### 3. Joining in with organised British in Europe lobbying campaigns

British in Europe organises specific campaigns during which members of groups right across the EU27 are asked to lobby MPs, MEPs or peers on a specific issue. You'll find these campaigns publicised on the British in Europe website (and also on our Facebook page, Facebook group and in our regular newsletter), on the Facebook page or group page of your member group, or via your group's own email newsletter. Please look out for these and take part.

- We provide you with full details of what to do and how to do it, including the background to the campaign, spreadsheets with names and contact details of relevant recipients, and a template letter/email.
- We *strongly* suggest that you personalise templates (see above) to make them your own. You can do this simply, by including a short paragraph telling something of your personal story, or you can rewrite the basic template into your own words (make sure you keep the main points though).
- We'll often ask you to forward replies to a particular email address so that we can keep track of them. From time to time we may include a request for your MP to sign a pledge.

### 4. Lobbying MPs, peers and MEPs independently

Many of our members do this, and some have developed ongoing conversations and relationships with those they're lobbying. You'll find that peers particularly are open to this, as are some MEPs.

Lobbying independently can be particularly rewarding in that your email or letter is likely to be a one-off; as long as you follow some basic rules (see previous section) you'll have a good chance of getting a response. Several members have had their emails read out in Parliamentary debates.

A few pointers:

- Make sure you follow the 'Do's and Don'ts' in the previous section.
- Find contact details for UK MPs and peers here: <http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/>
- Find contact details for MEPs here: <http://bit.ly/MEPSpreadsheet>
- It's best only to lobby your own UK MP - in fact an MP is not allowed to respond to another MP's constituent and you will almost certainly get a stock response that tells you that *unless* you can convince them that you're writing on a matter of national importance. If you do want to lobby others, then make sure you have a good reason - for example, if they are ministers or members of relevant committees or the cabinet - and in that case, send your email or letter to the correct address for that post at the House of Commons.
- Many peers aren't really geared up for email and just use a generic House of Lords email address ([contactholmemb@parliament.uk](mailto:contactholmemb@parliament.uk)). To contact a peer who uses this address, write your email as usual, but *include the peer's name in the email subject line*. Note that you can only send identical letters to 6 peers in 48 hours using this address otherwise they won't be delivered.
- Consider sending a hand written letter (on paper!) rather than an email to make your communication stand out from the crowd.
- You can write to MEPs in both your country of residence and in the UK (make sure you include a UK address for the latter).
- Remember that if you write to a UK minister, they won't see or reply to your email or letter unless you are their constituent. Communications from members of the public to Secretaries and Ministers of State are answered by civil servants.
- Make sure you include two key points: firstly, that British citizens living in the EU form the biggest single national group whose rights are involved in the citizens' rights negotiations; and secondly, that four-fifths of the British people living in the EU are of working age or younger.

## 5. Contacting members of the parliament of your country of residence

It's fair to say that with just a few honourable exceptions, most local politicians have little idea either of the issues that will emanate from Brexit or of how Brexit will affect British residents.

We may not be able to vote for them if we're not citizens of our host countries, but they still represent us as residents in their constituency. Why not join with other British residents you know in the same area and put your heads together to send a joint letter? You could put a call out in your member

group to see if there are others in the same area - many heads are better than one! And if a group of you come together to make contact, it would be a great idea to ask for a meeting with your member of parliament too.

## 6. Attending local Embassy meetings

British Embassies across the EU27 are holding regular information meetings for British citizens in different towns and cities with the specific aim of providing information on citizens' rights post-Brexit. We strongly recommend that you attend if at all possible – not necessarily to learn new information (as members of British in Europe you're likely to be as well-informed as the embassy staff!) but because it's an important opportunity for our specific concerns to be heard directly and taken back via Embassies to the British government. The meeting usually begins with a short talk, followed by time for questions.

Some suggestions for how to make best use of these meetings:

- ✓ Use your British in Europe member group to link up with other members who are going to the same meeting. Work together to prepare a list of questions in advance to ask at the meeting – ask for help from your group leaders if you're not sure what to ask, or read the British in Europe website to check out the most important outstanding issues.
- ✓ Keep the questions relevant, succinct, specific and fact-based. Don't worry too much about asking questions to which you already know the answers - remember that you're asking them to make sure they are heard by the Ambassador, on record, and carried back to the British government.
- ✓ Take with you a copy of the latest British in Europe publication to hand to the Ambassador at the end of the meeting.
- ✓ Print out a list of questions before you go. Try and leave time to meet up with other attendees before the meeting starts for a quick 'huddle' to plan and organise yourselves. Either choose a spokesperson, or divide up the questions between you. It's a good idea to leave a copy of your list of questions with the Ambassador at the end of the meeting.
- ✓ If it's permitted, take photos and tweet 'live' from the event.
- ✓ There will almost certainly be people at the meeting who are unaware of British in Europe and of our campaign. If possible, use the 'question time' to say something about our organisation, and explain who we are and what we do. Invite people to make contact with you after the meeting if they want to find out more. Make sure that you can give them basic info and website details.

- ✓ There may also be press and media people at the meeting – for example, a recent session in France was attended by local reporters from a national TV channel who recorded several short interviews for broadcast. Be prepared and have something ready to say.
- ✓ After the meeting, report back to your member group on how the event went. Use social media to give an account too – and think about tweeting or emailing local and Anglophone media afterwards.

## OUTSIDE THE BOX

### 7. From apathy to empathy - telling stories as a means of influencing

The situation of British people who've moved to the EU hasn't yet succeeded in attracting much empathy amongst our fellow citizens back in the UK. Stereotypes abound, and are constantly being reinforced by the press and media. On top of that it's a current belief (myth) that citizens' rights have been fully protected during Phase 1 and therefore are now off the agenda for the next phase of negotiations.

There are a number of things we can do to try and change things: to raise awareness of the fact that our rights have not yet been resolved, try to change our public image and help people to see that we're real (and ordinary) people. While it may not be campaigning directly for our rights, working to **change the narrative** – and the hearts and minds of our fellow citizens – works at a complementary, softer level to support the direct lobbying activity going on alongside.

Think of this as storytelling. You'll have a plot, identifiable characters, a beginning, a middle ... and an ending – one created by you, the storyteller, to demonstrate what you need to happen.

Why storytelling? It's a great way to **connect** with other people and allow them to **identify emotionally** with you, your situation and how you feel about it – and that will help create **empathy** and a **shared sense of community**. It's a **positive** approach that's about bringing **emotion** into your campaign.

As human beings, we're hard-wired to be interested in other people rather more than in legal points or dry facts – and storytelling is one of the oldest tools in our history for shaping thinking and behaviour and creating community and shared narrative: just think about campfires, fairy tales, Icelandic or Native American sagas ...

And there's another benefit to this alternative kind of action too. 18 months on from the referendum, many active lobbyists are beginning to feel burnt out after taking part in tens, even hundreds of traditional lobbying campaigns. This is a great way to change tack and come back into the game with new energy, using completely different methods.



A few ideas:

- Write to local or regional newspapers that cover your previous area of the UK. Letters to the editor are simple means of influencing a community, and can be submitted by anyone. Keep your letter to one simple theme; present your story in the first paragraph, then follow up with supporting arguments. Don't write more than around 200 words altogether.
- Write a short article or op-ed and submit it to similar publications; you can also contact a journalist to tell your 'human interest' story. To keep it relevant to the publication, make sure that you link what you're writing to your previous area in some way – what you did there, what made you move, how the two communities compare, how you're still connected with your old community, etc.
- Make a short video telling your story, upload it to YouTube and post it around social media (Twitter, Facebook). You can do this easily from your computer or phone. A video will bring you and your story to life and is likely to be shared much more widely than the written word.
- Arrange to meet your MP in person if you visit the UK, and if possible take a friend or relative with you so that your story is heard from two angles. Concentrate on the human aspect rather than on the technical citizens' rights issues.
- Contact clubs, associations, unions and other groups that you were/are a member of in the UK to see if there is an outlet to tell your story.
- Look for ways of telling your story to a former workplace or university alumni association – are there magazines or newsletters, retired staff or student groups? Many alumni associations are always on the lookout for stories of former students.
- Involve children and young people, and get them to tell their own stories to other young people using Snapchat, Instagram and other current social media channels.
- Write a blog about what it's like to be a British citizen living in the EU right now – or find other blogs where you can be a guest contributor.
- Remember to 'pitch' your story to your audience – find a common interest and speak to them in language that they'll relate to. Help them to see you and your situation differently from how they saw things before they heard your story.
- Whatever you write, try to include two key points that are constantly overlooked both by politicians and the general public : firstly, that British citizens living in the EU form the biggest single national group whose rights are affected by the citizens' rights negotiations; and secondly, that four-fifths of the British people living in the EU are of working age or younger.