



INFLUENCING LOCAL DECISION MAKERS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Different campaigns will have different targets, or decision makers.

When you begin to plan your campaign, you'll need to decide which decision makers you need to target. This will vary across campaigns as different organisations, people, or groups all have different levels of responsibility and influence in your area. It's a good idea to find out more about the decision makers you want to target before you think about the tactics you might use to influence them.

Here we've explained more about the different decision makers in your area, and some top tips for arranging and attending meetings. This list isn't exhaustive – you may think of other people or organisations in your area that could influence the issue you're campaigning on.

Top tip

You can find out who your MLAs are and their contact details at www.niassembly.gov.uk

1. Your MLA

Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) are elected to represent the interests of constituents like you in the Northern Ireland Assembly and can be useful in influencing local decision makers, or getting publicity for your campaign. Each constituency is represented by six MLAs.

The Northern Ireland Assembly has power over areas such as health and social services, local government, housing, transport and employment and skills. On these types of topics you should contact your MLA.

The UK Parliament retains control over some areas, such as national security, defence and UK-wide tax; on these topics it's best to contact your MP.

In your local area your MLA can:

- Attend a meeting or launch event to show support for a campaign (you'll need to ask them quite far in advance).
- Express concern on your behalf to local organisations, such as your local Health and Social Care Trust.

- Visit a local service, or MS Society group event to learn more about living with MS.

Your MLA can also be influential in the Northern Ireland Assembly – if you think your MLA can help with an MS Society campaign, contact nicampaigns@mssociety.org.uk to let us know.

Top tip

You can find out who your councillor is, and their contact details, at www.writetothem.com

2. Your MP

MPs are elected to represent the interests of constituents like you in Parliament and can be useful in influencing or getting publicity for your campaign if it is a UK wide issue or is outside the power of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

In your local area your MP can:

- Attend a meeting or launch event to show support for a campaign (you'll need to ask them quite far in advance).
- Express concern on your behalf to local organisations, such as your local authority.
- Visit a local service or branch event to learn more about living with MS.

Your MP can also be influential in the UK parliament – if you think your MP can help with an MS Society campaign, contact campaigns@mssociety.org.uk to let us know.

3. Your local council

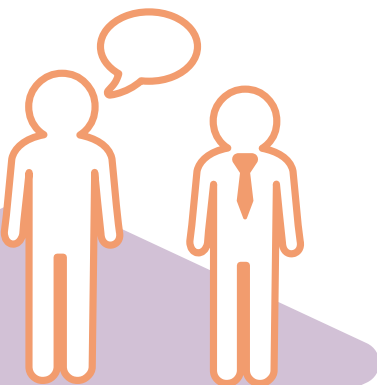
Your local council is responsible for providing services such as leisure centres, local parks and looking after the local environment you live in. They are also responsible for community planning.

Some of the reasons you might get in touch with your local council are:

- Influencing a decision that is about to be made, for example, on accessibility of a council facility.
- Fighting for new services to be offered.
- Challenging a decision that has already been made.

Your local councillor, elected to represent your ward, has a duty to represent your views and make the relevant staff member at the council aware of your concerns. Speaking to your councillor can be an effective way to put pressure on the local council.

As well as writing to councillors, calling or emailing, you could arrange to meet them in person or attend a council meeting. You can find out more by visiting your local council's website.



4. Local health bodies in Northern Ireland

Health and Social Care Trusts

Health and Social Care Trusts provide important services to people affected by MS, including health services and social care.

Some of the reasons you might get in touch with your local trust are:

- Influencing a decision that is about to be made, for example, on social care funding.
- Fighting for new services to be offered.
- Challenging a decision that has already been made, such as the closure of a day centre.

Health and Social Care Trusts have a duty to consult the public on any major decision they make about new and existing services. If you disagree with their proposals, it's important that you tell them your views.

Local Commissioning Groups (LCGs)

LCGs fund services that are provided by the Health and Social Care Trust, including hospitals, community based services and social care.

LCGs have a duty to involve their patients, carers, and the public in decisions about the services they fund. Their meetings are public and anyone can attend and listen to what is being discussed. You can contact your ICG to find out more about how they are doing this, and ask to get involved.

Patient and Client Council

The Patient and Client Council gives patients and members of the public the opportunity to influence how local health and care decisions are made in their local area. You can contact the Patient and Client Council if you think a service isn't being provided in the way it should, or if you think the needs of people with MS need to be considered in more detail. Find out more on their website www.patientclientcouncil.hscni.net.

Before approaching a decision maker

- Check if they're the ultimate decision maker on this issue, or if they will need to influence someone else.
- Think about what you want them to do. Do you want to ask them to agree to your campaign aims straight away, or would you like to invite them to meet with you or attend an event?
- Think about any barriers there might be – why might a local decision-maker not wish to support your campaign? How might you change their minds?
- Speak to the MS Society campaigns team if you aren't sure who to approach or how to approach them.

Approaching decision makers

- You can approach them via phone, email or letter.
- Remember your key messages. Stick to your one issue and explain the outcome you'd like to see.
- Include personal stories or evidence to back up your campaign aim if possible.
- Include your full contact details so they're able to reply.

Meeting decision makers

- Explain your issue and the outcome you'd like to see. Keep discussions focused on your issue.
- Your decision maker won't expect you to be an expert, but they will want to know why you think this is an important issue for local people.
- Take any evidence you may have, and bring a copy for the decision maker.
- Follow up afterwards with a letter or email thanking them for their time. You should also confirm any actions that were agreed.