

CATCHING COUNCILLORS' CONCERN - a novice's guide to lobbying

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Local politicians are largely used to being lobbied about dog shit, potholes and fly-tipping. And they're often blamed for whatever is going on in Westminster. They're busy, stressed and sometimes tribal AF. Lobbying them requires tact, compassion and stamina. Not doing so means you will lose more often than not, at a local level.

What. Are. You. Trying. To. Achieve?

Why are you talking to these councillors? Is it to do a one off "I really care about issue X and then I am going to go away" or is this an attempt to build/maintain a longer-term relationship?

Or are you going in about a current issue (and climate change is always current) about a road, the (lack of) bike lanes, air quality? Are there a series of upcoming decisions that you want the Councillor to do something about? These decisions may have long-term consequences for social justice and sustainability. Like, um, the ongoing and escalating failures around climate policy, to pick a random example.

It is important that you are asking them to do something specific. For example:

- Raise a question in a scrutiny committee
- Raise a question in full council
- Get officers to explain decision

Who are councillors, anyway?

"Councillors choose to be councillors for all sorts of reasons. And the dismissive public and media assumptions about self-interest are not borne out by the many hours of unpaid work put in by local politicians. Some become councillors from social conscience, from a sense of duty, some become councillors because of a fascination with politics itself, from ambition, the wish to build a political career. Some wish to serve or represent local communities or to pursue a particular campaign, some are interested in local government activities - and discover that it is possible to be involved in high-level decisions without the education or qualification required of a manager. The glass ceiling is not as solid in politics as it is in management, and it is possible for clever councillors who are working class, or lack university education, or are women or from ethnic minorities, to achieve leadership positions that they would be unlikely to reach in management. Some councillors are frankly there by accident, because of a freak election victory,

because they were talked into it by friends". (Goss, 2001; 132)

They generally fall into three categories:

Sympathetic (but probably very busy): Councillors tend to have high workloads and a lot of 'casework' - trying to sort out the problems of people who live in the ward, around tenancy, immigration status, lack of money and much, much more.. Alongside that there are party responsibilities, particularly around elections (stuffing envelopes, canvassings), their official council duties (sitting on committees, reading reports). and - usually - a day job (most councillors need a second job to top up their council allowance).

Neutral/indifferent: They don't know about the issue, it doesn't float their boat. They are at capacity with things they do care about. You aren't in their ward. They think it doesn't affect their ward.

Actively hostile: They have spoken out on the issue, holding the opposite opinion. They may even have spoken out against you (albeit not by name). You would approach these councillors in order to say that you had tried to lobby - and they may in turn agree to meet you to say that they had given you the time of the day. You should go in without any expectation of success. That said, eventually there may be a straw that breaks the camel's back.

On some issues, it may be quite easy to work out which category a councillor falls into. On others, you may need to do some research (see the tips below).

You also need to see how they fit within the power structures. If they are an independent/member of the opposition, then their actual ability to affect council policy is usually pretty small. If they are a backbench councillor they may well have very limited scope for action (though may sit on a particular scrutiny committee, or advisory body). If they are a member of the Executive, they have more power, and therefore more responsibility.

In Manchester you'll probably be talking to Labour councillors

The council has 96 councillors 3 for each of 32 wards. 93 of the councillors are Labour. That means for 30 wards, your choice is Labour, Labour or Labour. In Didsbury West there are two Liberal Democrat councillors. In Clayton and Ancoats there is an Independent (who, fun fact, was previously a Liberal Democrat). This is NOT to say that all councillors are Blairites or Corbynistas, or even fans of the leader. And some of the newer councillors will be starry-eyed,

and tell you that there is no “whipping” in the Party (at least, not the political kind). But the dominance of Labour simply means that there are sensitivities around openly challenging the leadership of their own party (discuss: “the Westminster system is fundamentally broken”).

Climate change is a sore point

First, you have to understand that most councillors have only the haziest grasp on the causes and consequences of climate change as well as the local actions that should be happening (and yes, this includes many who can call themselves “carbon literate”). There are no quick fixes - it does not readily fit into their usual behaviour and thought cycles, so if taken seriously it would need them to rethink many of their ways of operating.

Second, many of them are probably feeling a bit guilty about that, since they all voted, with much glee, to declare a “Climate Emergency” in Manchester in July 2020. And how much pushing have most of them actually done for fundamental change in the Council and the city since then? Probably best not to ask that question, if you’re trying to build a relationship with ‘em...

Third up, there is no record of success for them to defend. Manchester City Council has been very good at producing plans containing promises and the glossy pages that accompany them. In actually making things like “a low carbon culture” mean anything, or in scrutinising the (in)action of the elected and unelected leaders over the last decade, not so much.

Ten years of active failure (and another 15 around “the environment” more generally before that) and intransigent defensive “leadership” make the whole question of climate change one that is potentially quite career-limiting.

Finally, we should remember that Councillors are just not used to sustained scrutiny of their Party/ Council’s uselessness on a given issue. They’re used to a few weeks of agitation, followed by resignation from the punters and then a new bunch come along later. Sustained intelligent pressure is not a thing, generally.

So, those top tips for lobbying

Before

Be aware of the enormous pressures on councillors
They receive abuse, are the subject of unfair expectations (they are not MPs, they are not well-paid - in fact many combine their council role with another job). They are normally dealing with intractable issues.

Know who they are and what they care about
Ask around in your community (but be wary of taking any super-strong opinions at face value). Search the

internet (not just google - also local newspapers etc). Look at their Twitter feed. If you’re really dedicated, look at minutes of council meetings.

Know your issue and how to frame/tailor it

Know what you are talking about. Define what counts as ‘success’ in your encounter - is there a specific thing you want the councillor(s) to do? Is it actually feasible? Will they get back to you
Know how to ‘pitch’ your message so it more or less conforms with what they are interested in (without being shoe-horned/fake).

During

Have something in writing

Have a specific ask for them (something they can actually do. “Overthrow capitalism” is not an ask) Remember, if you are at their ward surgeries (which is the name given to politicians’ meetings with voters), there will probably be other people with super-urgent problems. And if not, you might be the last thing between the councillor and their own house. So, yes, have your meeting, but make sure you are not outstaying your welcome.

After

Shortly after, send a short thank you with a summary of what you talked about, and any action points either of you took on and deadlines for doing them. Refuse to be fobbed off. If you asked for info and didn’t get it, submit a Freedom of Information Act request.

Further reading

[Rebecca Wills on MPs knowledge/concern](#)

How can I move from novice level to practitioner level at this?

There’s no substitute for just getting out there and doing it (with friends who live in the same ward). Tell us how it went. Stay tuned for the next (longer) beginner’s guide, which will come at you soon. Ask us questions (we may not know the answer). Check out our [website](#)

References

Goss, S. 2001. Making Local Governance Work: Networks relationships and the management of change. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

*Novice and practitioner level is a reference to the Active Citizenship Toolkit, which CEM and allies are developing. See [here](#)

CEM’s [Manchester City Council for beginners](#)

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