



# GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY-LED POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

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A Toolkit for Neighbourhood and Community Centres

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## WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

This Guide has been designed for Neighbourhood and Community Centre staff, volunteers and board members to inspire them to continue engaging with elected representatives as part of their community development role. It contains information, insights and tools about political engagement at all levels of government.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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LCSA is a membership organisation representing the diverse interests of locally governed not-for-profit neighbourhood centres & community organisations in New South Wales.

# POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AS PART OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

## POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT STARTS WITH THE COMMUNITY

Neighbourhood and Community Centres are community-led, not-for-profit organisations that work with local people to build safe, strong, resilient and connected communities. They are placed-based and deeply rooted in their local community, forming part of the essential social infrastructure in a community.

The LCSA membership, made up of 175 Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCCs), is the largest community-led infrastructure network in NSW and these centres are uniquely placed to know and respond to the needs and aspirations of their communities.

Strong, effective political engagement must start with the community.

Identifying local needs and issues and developing effective responses, where local people participate in what happens in their community is integral to the work of NCCs. This means creating opportunities for local people to come together, talk about their issues, participate in the community and see change happening.

*“The work we do is not about us and not about us owning things, it’s about the community and providing the supports and resources to effect change in their lives.”*

Jillian Hogan  
San Remo Neighbourhood Centre

# BENEFITS OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

## WHAT IS POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT?

Building mutually beneficial relationships between your community and relevant elected representatives, such as local councillors and mayors, state and federal members of parliament and government ministers will support your Centre's goal to drive change within the community. At times, engaging with opposition spokespeople and people aspiring to be politicians may also be useful.

Engaging with politicians is not a party-political activity and relationships with politicians should be based on your organisation's goals and aspirations, not the political affiliations of particular individuals.

## WHY DO POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT?

There are two main reasons for engaging with politicians:

- To influence ongoing decision making within governments by exchanging information and raising community issues
- To advocate with, and on behalf of the community, about a specific issue where the community wants change.

### **Raise Awareness of Local Issues**

Neighbourhood and Community Centres are deeply rooted in the community and can act as a conduit between politicians and their electorates - the communities they represent - connecting the politician with the real lives and issues of people in the community. The better informed a politician is, the better they can represent the real needs of their constituency.

### **Create Community Advocates**

Elected representatives can champion the needs and issues of the communities they represent on councils, in parliament and within political parties, where decisions are made that directly impact on your community.

### **Raise the Profile of Your Centre**

Politicians, whether they're in government, opposition or the cross-bench have large networks and connections across the community and they can raise the profile of your community and Centre to attract new participants as well as opportunities for new collaborations or sources of funding.

## **CASE STUDY: HOW POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT WORKED FOR THE SAN REMO NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRE**

“Neighbourhood Centres need to engage with politicians to do the work we need to do in the community,” says Jillian Hogan, of San Remo Neighbourhood Centre. “Centres need to foster relationships with politicians, keep them informed about what’s happening and work with them. Neighbourhood Centres are best positioned to facilitate conversations about community needs with politicians, otherwise who else does?”

The San Remo area in the north of the Central Coast LGA, did not have local mental health services for young people and increasingly the NC was driving young people the 45-minute trip to Gosford where there was a government funded mental health provider.

The NC convened a meeting with the community, local service providers, local high schools and health services to discuss the need for a local service. Also invited was the local Federal MP. “I first met the MP when I attended a local function they were at,” explained Jillian. “The MP was interested in what the NC was doing and from then on, I had a regular meeting with her, kept her office informed about local issues and invited her to our functions. We developed a positive working relationship.”

The Federal MP attended the community meeting and a working party was formed comprising parents, health and other service providers, 2 high schools and the MP. The working group was an opportunity to raise awareness about the issue and lobby the Federal Government for funding.

After months of meetings, the MP secured a 30-minute meeting with the Federal Health Minister when he visited the Central Coast. The working party coordinated a meeting of about 50 young people, parents and service providers to attend with the Minister.

“The young people and parents talked about their lived experiences. They highlighted the access issues, the lack of reliable public transport and the need for a service locally. The Minister was very interested in their stories and the meeting went very well,” recounts Jillian. “It was clear the stories from the young people and parents made the biggest impact.”

Months later, the working group were advised a satellite service would be set up in the northern end of the LGA for 3 days per week in a neighbouring suburb near San Remo.

“The process has really broken down silos, brought services together and created strong partnerships,” says Jillian. “It doesn’t matter that it’s located somewhere else, it’s not about everything being in the NC. What matters is there are 200 kids getting a service.”

# WHO ARE YOUR ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES?

Knowing who you are talking to, what they can do and what they want is an important part of building relationships. It is important to know which level of government you should be talking to about your community's issues.

## WHO DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

<b>LOCAL COUNCIL</b>	<p><b>Mayor</b></p> <p>Your local and likely most important politician for your community. They will want to be connected closely to the community and to regularly promote Council activities. A key decision maker in Council. Target for a strong relationship, regular updates and participation in activities. Some Councils provide small community grants to NGOs and can provide other in-kind support.</p>
	<p><b>Councillors</b></p> <p>Some Councils identify Councillors on a geographic basis. Generally available to discuss local issues and an important advocate within Council's decision making processes. Also will want to have a profile in the local community. Target for a strong relationship, updates and participation in activities. They may be more accessible than the Mayor.</p>
	<p><b>Other local community leaders/aspiring politicians</b></p> <p>These people are likely to make themselves known to you as part of their process of engaging with the community. They could advocate issues to the Mayor, other Councillors and other people of influence.</p>
<b>STATE GOVERNMENT</b>	<p><b>Local Member of Parliament (MP)</b></p> <p>The voice of your community in the NSW Parliament lower house (House of Representatives/Legislative Assembly). NSW Govt is the main source of funding for Neighbourhood and Community Centres and other services in the community such as Health, Education, Policing. A very important advocate for your community and the activities of your Centre and very interested in issues experienced by their local constituency. They are able to advocate to Ministers/Premier about specific issues. Target for a strong relationship, regular updates and participation in activities.</p>
	<p><b>Minister for Families and Communities</b></p> <p>Key decision maker about funding and policies that impact on your community and Centre. An important relationship regarding specific issues and funding and contractual obligations. An important advocate in Cabinet about human services issues. Congratulate newly appointed ministers, introduce them to your community and what your Centre does. Invite them to visit when in the area. Target Minister for specific issues relevant to your community.</p>

	<p><b>Other relevant Ministers</b></p> <p>As portfolios change, it is important to identify the Minister relevant to the issue you wish to raise such as the Minister for Women, Minister for Mental Health etc. Again, important advocates in Cabinet. Congratulate newly appointed Ministers, introduce them to your community and what your Centre does and invite them to visit when in the area. Again, target relevant Minister for specific issues.</p>
	<p><b>Upper House - Members of the Legislative Council (MLC)</b></p> <p>While upper house members do not represent a particular geographic constituency, they may have an interest in an issue your community is concerned about. Target them about specific issues.</p>
	<p><b>Opposition spokespeople</b></p> <p>Opposition Shadow Ministers or Cross-bench Spokespeople will likely be more accessible than a Minister. Plus, they could very well be Minister one day. Can advocate on issues to government MPs and Ministers. Congratulate relevant incoming spokespeople and keep them updated with relevant news of your Centre.</p>
	<p><b>Other Aspiring politicians</b></p> <p>These people could include party members who aspire to run for preselection for an electorate. It is likely they would become known to you through the course of your Centre's activities, attending functions etc. They could advocate issues to other politicians and people of influence and may one day be an elected representative.</p>

<p><b>FEDERAL GOVERNMENT</b></p>	<p><b>Local Member of Parliament (MP)</b></p> <p>The voice of your community in the Federal Government, Canberra. An important advocate about policy issues which impact on your community (e.g., treatment of refugees, issues with Centrelink). Might be harder to contact as they share their time between their constituency and Canberra. Target for regular updates and participation in relevant activities.</p>
	<p><b>Relevant Ministers</b></p> <p>Ministerial portfolios change, so it is important to identify the Minister relevant to the issue you wish to raise. Congratulate newly appointed ministers, introduce them to what your Centre does and invite them to visit when in the area. Again, target relevant Minister for specific issues.</p>
	<p><b>Senators</b></p> <p>As for State Government upper house.</p>
	<p><b>Opposition Spokespeople</b></p> <p>As for State Government</p>



To find your local political representatives there are a number of websites you can access. Most politicians have their own websites and provide contact details. Otherwise try these websites listed in the table below.

<b>LOCAL GOVERNMENT</b>	Your local Council website will contain the names and contact details of your local representatives. Contact them directly.
<b>STATE GOVERNMENT</b>	<a href="http://nsw.gov.au">nsw.gov.au</a> <a href="http://parliament.nsw.gov.au">parliament.nsw.gov.au</a> <a href="http://elections.nsw.gov.au">elections.nsw.gov.au</a>
<b>FEDERAL GOVERNMENT</b>	<a href="http://aph.gov.au">aph.gov.au</a> <a href="http://electorate.aec.gov.au">electorate.aec.gov.au</a>

## WHAT DO POLITICIANS WANT?

It is important to understand what politicians want, to be able to engage with them productively. They have a job to do, but they are people too!

### Connection to their Community

Politicians are elected to represent their community and will want to see improvements and changes in their constituency during their tenure. The more they can understand their community, the more they can respond to their issues. Centres can act as a conduit to connect elected representatives to their constituency. Meet with them regularly.

### Increase their Profile

Politicians love to be seen in the community announcing something new, actively participating in events and supporting community concerns. This is a fundamental role of being a politician, the more people know them, the better. Invite politicians along to your events and activities and give them an opportunity to say something.

### Positive Reinforcement

A core part of a politician's job is to listen to people and the community about what concerns them and what things are not working. Finding ways to acknowledge the positive work your local representative does, can go a long way to building a healthy and respectful relationship.

### Requests that are Easily Achievable

Politicians are involved in complex issues that take time to address. A busy politician is always keen to listen to requests that they can respond to and action immediately. Keep this in mind as you engage with them. Is there something locally that would be easy for them to sort out and then announce that they did?

## Keeping Their Jobs

The job of all elected representatives is to represent their constituency at their particular level of government. To continue doing this job they need to get re-elected every 3-4 years. The six months leading up to an election, or immediately following a state or federal budget, can be good times to target politicians, who will be wanting to increase their community profile at that time.

*“I do believe politicians want to know what is going on in the community so it’s important to connect with them on a regular basis, let them know when you’re having an event and invite them to come along. Let them say something as well - there has to be something in it for them! MPs rely on the NC for input from the community and particularly like coming to large events. I think we have built good relationships with MPs and over the years they have valued the Neighbourhood Centre and the role it plays in the community.”*

Jean Fell  
The Neighbourhood Centre Bathurst

## WHAT CAN INDIVIDUAL POLITICIANS DO?

While elected representatives cannot themselves solve all the community’s problems they can advocate on behalf of their constituents in various decision making forums and directly to Ministers who are key decision makers. The more a politician knows about your community and Centre, the more likely they will be able to speak about them.

Having an understanding of exactly what politicians can do is critical to a successful engagement strategy. Sometimes you just need to ask.

### IN THE COMMUNITY

Make decisions	Politicians participate in a range of decision-making forums across all levels of government. This is one of the key areas to influence. From time-to-time funds may be made available in the electorate or Council area to give small grants to community and not-for-profit organisations. These elected representatives can play a key role in deciding where this money is spent.
Advocate	Politicians can advocate on behalf of constituents in numerous ways: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Correspondence - it might be bureaucratic, but politicians use written correspondence to Ministers as a key strategy to document issues. Your local MP is likely to use this as a first way of raising an issue and seeking a response from the government. This includes requests for funding.</li><li>• Meeting with a Minister - all MPs, both in government, opposition or the cross benches can request a meeting with a minister to raise constituency concerns.</li><li>• Coordinating meetings with the Minister and your Centre - if the issue warrants it, a combined meeting with a Minister can be requested. Of course, it’s up to the Minister to decide whether or not they will accept the invitation!</li></ul>

Provide information	<p>Importantly, elected representatives can act as a conduit of information back to the community about the machinations of government and departments. Local politicians can be a good source of information about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• helping to understand government decisions and their rationale</li> <li>• funding opportunities</li> <li>• opportunities in the community to collaborate with other organisations/businesses</li> </ul>
Promote	<p>At a local level, elected representatives can use their large networks to facilitate collaborations between businesses, not-for-profit organisations and/or government agencies to improve community amenity and wellbeing. Some politicians convene roundtables and other forums to bring interested parties together.</p>

## IN COUNCIL CHAMBERS AND PARLIAMENT

LOCAL COUNCIL	<b>Motions</b>	All Councillors can put motions on the agenda of meetings to change council policy around local issues and services.
	<b>Advisory Committees</b>	Councillors sit on committees that feed into the decision-making processes around such issues as disability access, the environment, traffic, services for youth and seniors.

STATE AND FEDERAL GOVT	<b>Legislation</b>	MPs often look for ways to make their speeches on legislation relevant to their local community.
	<b>Question Time</b>	This is an opportunity for MPs to raise concerns to the Govt through specific questions. Whether your MP is able to ask a relevant question will depend on their affiliations and seniority.
	<b>Private Members Statements</b>	An opportunity for MPs to talk about concerns or notable events or organisations in their electorate.
	<b>Committees</b>	Set up to help Parliament examine issues in detail. Some committees call for submissions and conduct hearings. Well informed MPs can raise issues of concern if they are on a Committee.
	<b>Petitions</b>	MPs can table petitions signed and presented to them by their constituencies to raise issues and perhaps influence decision making. Issues must be ones that Parliament can act on.

## **CASE STUDY: TENACITY PAYS OFF FOR FORSTER NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRE**

Accommodation problems are very familiar to many Neighbourhood and Community Centres. Reasonably priced commercial rental properties that can be used as a community facility are hard to find, so many Centre's rely on government owned properties.

Forster Neighbourhood Centre (FNC) faced an enormous increase in rent and an unsuitable commercially leased premises when the women's shelter they were co-located with moved out. First port of call, explains Corinne Stevenson, FNC Manager, was to meet with the Mayor and staff at the local Council to ask for assistance.

While initially, the Council couldn't help, FNC was told later that a Council owned building, which used to be a bottle shop, was available. The building had been vacant for 18 months and any Council plans for the site were years away. Council could let the building to FNC at a nominal rent if they renovated it. FNC jumped at the opportunity.

Shortly after, FNC were advised that the hotel next door had decided to re-open the bottle shop and were offering Council market rent. Because it was a competing offer, the final decision to let the building had to be made by the full Council. Council staff supported the hotel, given the commercial rent was worth much more than FNC could afford.

The FNC Board and staff were not deterred. They already had good working relationships with the Mayor and some Councillors and had built a good reputation in the community. Formal correspondence was written to all the Councillors. The FNC Manager and Board followed this up with a personal phone call to all the Councillors and Mayor on a number of occasions, including those they did not have a strong existing relationship with. In this process FNC developed some new allies amongst the Councillors who also helped with strategic advice to further their cause. Some Councillors felt the commercial rent offer was too good to turn down while others supported FNC wholeheartedly. Unfortunately, FNC felt the Council staff did not manage the process well.

FNC had exhausted all other commercial opportunities locally, so offered the rent they were paying for their existing property, in the hope of swaying the decision making. However, Council deferred the decision for months. Finally, FNC made a formal complaint to the General Manager (GM) of Council about how the decision was being made and the difficult position FNC was being put in and copied in all the Councillors.

When the Item was finally placed on a Council meeting, FNC spoke again to all the Councillors about the social return on investment and the community benefits of the Neighbourhood Centre and the need for the site. At the meeting both the Hotel and FNC spoke. Councillors unanimously voted in favour of FNC.

The most important thing over the three years of this process, recounts the FNC Board, was the ongoing contact made with Council members and staff. "The need to follow up is absolutely essential as it holds stakeholders accountable and provides a good opportunity to create advocates," says the Board.

# ENGAGING WITH ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

## KNOW YOUR COMMUNITY

When you start talking to politicians you need to be prepared to talk authoritatively about your local community, who they are, what their issues are and what they need. This information may come from a number of sources but most importantly from the community itself through the Centre's community engagement processes.

### What information should you collect about your community?

- What is the physical/geographic context of your community? What might create issues for community members? (e.g. highway running through the community, isolated from major service Centre, rural location, etc).
- Who lives in your community? Numbers, age, diversity, socio/economic indicators - check the latest census and see what information your Council has.
- What are the main issues they experience? Check the census and Council information.
- What does the community say are the priority issues for them? What process do you have in place to collect this information? How do you keep it up to date?
- What processes does your Centre have in place to regularly engage with the community and make sure their voice is heard as part of your Centre's political engagement strategy?

### Develop information about your Centre:

- If you had two minutes to 'sell' your Centre to a local representative, would you be able to do it? Practice 'elevator pitches' and have them in your back pocket for when an opportunity arises.
- Factsheet: Introducing Neighbourhood Centres (found at the end of this Guide) has been designed to be able to hand directly to politicians and give them an overview of what a Neighbourhood Centre is.
- Create a one-page snapshot about your community that can be handed out.

A one-page snapshot about your community may include the following:

Community	Who lives in your community? demographic information, diversity etc. What are their major issues?
Centre Goals and Values	One to two sentences outlining the core of your Centre's values and reason for being.
Organisation	Who is on the Board, paid staff and the importance of volunteers to the organisation. A small chart might be useful if it's complex.
Services	Detail the breadth of services your Centre provides and any key collaborations in the community. Provide numbers of participants.
Community Engagement	How does your Centre engage with the community and include their voice in its activities.
Key Events	Outline any key events that a politician could be interested in attending (e.g. yearly festival).
Achievements	Key milestones and achievements in the last 12 months, (e.g. years of operation, events sponsored, awards, funding raised/received)
Ways to get involved	How would someone get involved with your Centre? Make sure there is update to date contact information.

## STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING WITH POLITICIANS

### MEETINGS

Face to face meetings is a good way to outline the issues of your community and introduce your Centre to your local representatives.

Plan to meet at least a few times a year to keep them up to date about the needs of your community and generally the things your Centre is doing. Once a good relationship is established, extra meetings can be made when there are specific issues you want your representatives to advocate about.

Things to remember:

- Key it brief - politicians are busy people, aim to have everything said within a maximum of an hour.

- Don't overwhelm them with too many issues all at once, especially the first time you meet. A series of simple encounters can give the time needed to build a more nuanced relationship.
- Know what you want to say in advance - be prepared!
- Plan for the meeting - what are the three things you want to leave imprinted on the politician's memory?
- Always have a clear agenda in your mind
- Work out who needs to attend and who speaks about what issue - don't all talk at once!
- Do your homework - know what the concerns and thinking is of the politician and their attitudes to issues you are going to raise. Read up on their previous media releases on the internet, read their bio - what are the arguments they are likely to respond to?
- Know what they are interested in so you can chat about something easy like the local football team to break the ice
- Keep the meeting friendly even when you need to be adversarial about an issue.
- Always say thank you at the end.
- Be prepared for last minute cancellations or delays.

A face-to-face meeting is also an opportunity to get feedback from politicians about what they have been doing about a particular issue or insights into general decisions that the government is making that the Centre is concerned about.

Follow up with a thank you message a few days after the meeting or visit and provide any positive feedback. May also be an opportunity to remind them about what they agreed to!

Try and book your next update meeting even if it's six months away - good to get in their busy diaries.

A CHECKLIST for meeting with politicians has been designed to help you prepare for a meeting (This can be found at the end of this Guide).

*“When lobbying a politician for something, use language that will set off alarm bells but always be respectful, no matter what the issue. Never put them on the spot or try and embarrass them. Remember, win the war not the battle.”*

Mel Paterson  
Engadine Community Services

## **VISITING THE COMMUNITY AND CENTRE**

Inviting politicians to your Centre and having local people attending can be a useful way to introduce a new representative in particular, to the community and the Centre.

Encourage them to drop in when they are in the area. But be prepared, have your elevator pitch ready. Do the same preparation as if it was a meeting.

Offer hospitality - everyone loves a cuppa and a piece of cake. This promotes a friendly environment where everyone can talk honestly about what they are concerned about.

Don't ambush a politician when they are visiting - if there is something of serious concern raise it informally and then request a formal meeting to discuss it further.

Also follow up with a thank you for dropping in message.

## **PUBLIC EVENTS**

If your Centre is at an event where there are local politicians, make sure you introduce the participants from your Centre. This is a good opportunity to talk casually about what is happening in your community and at the Centre and broadly raise any issues which you might want to flag for discussion at a later date.

Have in mind a few things to refer to like, remind them when you last met (to jog their memory), mention something they've been doing in their job (to acknowledge the work they do) and invite them to attend the Centre at any time. Maybe remind them of when you are to meet formally again for an update.

Don't monopolise the time of the politician as other people will want to talk to them as well.

If appropriate follow up a few days later.

If the Centre is hosting an event, invite a local representative to attend. Always a good idea to give them something to do and make sure that there is an opportunity for them to address the gathering. It is often useful to prepare the politician as much as possible so talk to their staff beforehand about the context of the event and provide a few dot points of the key things you would like the politician to address on the day, including, who the key attendees are that need acknowledging and something about the activity that is being run.

## **FUNDRAISING ACTIVITIES**

Engage local politicians in your fund-raising activities, get them to work for you by getting them to circulate your materials with their networks to get the message out and seek their assistance to get people to donate. Ask the politician for a donation as well!

If you have more than one politician wanting to engage with your Centre, plan a variety of different activities rather than have them all make a 10-minute speech at your annual fundraising event. This can not only avoid potentially awkward situations, it also acknowledges that different politicians have different audiences and agendas.



## **Direct Message/Written communication**

Direct emails and letters remain the most effective communication forms after face-to-face conversations and the telephone.

Get into the habit of keeping your local politician up to date with your activities with a regular newsletter or email but don't make it too often - quarterly at the most.

In all written communications (letters, emails, newsletters) keep the tone appropriate to the message you're trying to convey. Regardless of your personal relationship with the politicians, if you are making a formal request, say for funding, then keep the correspondence formal and be clear about the what, why, how much and when. It is likely that your correspondence will be forwarded onto other people.

A good strategy is to always thank a politician for their help formally a few days after the event - they can then use any information you give them when they are in discussion with others who may potentially benefit your Centre.

If your elected representative supports your issue, then any written information you provide will assist them in recounting the issue in other forums. Always leave a written summary of the key points you raise in a meeting.

Take notes of the meeting and send them back to the office of your representative. Make sure they are tight and focus on what the outcomes are, not a detailed description of the meeting.

Don't make anything more than a page - no-one turns over the page!

Make sure you get on the politicians mailing list for their updates and newsletters.

## **ONLINE MEDIA**

The internet and online communication tools will help your Centre maximise political engagement.

Your website is one of the first places a new politician or their staff will look to find out information about your community, the Centre and its activities. It's critical that it's kept up to date. If you don't have one yet, prioritise it!

Your website should contain information about:

- Who your community is and what things are important to it
- A physical description of the area and any geographic issues
- what your Centre does and who it helps
- How the Centre engages with the community and how people can get involved or have their say
- Who the organisation is, the members, staff and some history
- Any relevant document such as annual reports, media releases, reports on issues in the community

Your website is an opportunity to inform the public about what the issues are in your community and what campaigns and projects you are currently working on.

Maximise your use of communication channels to both engage with and keep up to date with relevant politicians. 'Like' and 'follow' their social media channels, sign up to their e-newsletter. Equally sign them up to your e-newsletter if you have one.

Set up a google alert to monitor when your community or Centre is mentioned in the media.

A handy idea is to put a QR code at the bottom of formal correspondence that links straight to the NC website where there is updated information about what the NC does and current projects and governance arrangements.

## **TRADITIONAL MEDIA**

Despite the digital age, television, newspapers and radio are still important sources of communication to the public and politicians. Build relationships with your local newspapers and community radio in particular and pitch stories to them when appropriate.

Politicians love to see themselves in the media, make sure you invite the media to attend any major events you have particularly if a politician is attending. Always make sure that photos are taken that can be used by the media.

Make sure you are on the list to get politicians media releases.

## **MAKING A POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT PLAN**

Develop a plan about what your Centre is going to do to engage your local politicians, why you want to engage them, how you will do it and how often. Having a written plan will make sure that it happens and ensure that engagement strategies are part of the regular activities of your Centre.

A successful engagement strategy will have a variety of different components. Some will involve direct engagement while others will be indirect. Either way a variety of actions is needed to ensure your plan has the best chance to build a positive relationship between you and your representatives, that benefits you both.

An engagement plan will cover similar elements of other strategic planning that your organisation does. Include engaging with elected representatives as part of this process or set aside dedicated time to prepare it.

It's all about choosing which method is the most appropriate for which occasion.

## MAKING A PLAN

A few things to consider:

What short and long term goals do you want to achieve?	Why do you want to engage with elected representatives? This will be determined by your current relationship with your targeted representatives. In the short-term, try and be realistic – don't expect too much from yourself or them. In the long-term, shoot for the stars!
What actions are you going to take and who is responsible?	Every idea you have, setting up regular meetings, writing letters, sending newsletters, all will need a series of steps to get them completed. Write down the steps and tasks involved and along side these identify exactly who is going to do it. When will these actions occur by, how often?
Produce materials	The factsheet in this Guide is just a starting point. You'll definitely also need a leaflet which overviews your Centre from a perspective a politician will understand. What other materials will you need to implement your plan?
Don't do it all yourself	Board members, staff and volunteers should be included in any planning process to generate new ideas, foster a sense of teamwork and create a sense of ownership.

## KEEP PARTY POLITICS OUT OF IT!

Party politics is best left alone when engaging with your local elected representatives. The best way to keep the politics out of it is to create meaningful relationship with local representatives from all political persuasions.

Some Centres may be reticent to get involved with politicians because of, well, the politics. Politicians may feel the same way, if they feel that a Centre staff or board members have certain political allegiances.

The key really is in how you talk about your Centre and the way you approach your engagement with the politician.

Some tips:

- Focus your engagement on the local issues
- Engage in friendly discussions about issues and policies - If the politician sees you as combative they are less likely to engage. But if they see you as generally interested in their point of view, and prepared to listen and understand it then that's a different story.
- Be sensitive to the needs of politicians and also different political alliances eg politicians from different political parties may not enjoy sitting next to each other

## ENGAGEMENT BEFORE AN ELECTION

One of the best times to engage with your local politicians is before an election. It is likely that around this time, existing elected representatives and other candidates in the upcoming election will be more available and interested to be engaged with the community.

Before an election meet with politicians to garner their support for issues and actions that are of concern in your community.

What should you do?

- Identify what the important issues are in your community – such as homelessness, health, domestic violence, the environment, social housing etc
- Examine the policies from the major and minor parties and independents in relation to those issues
- Form a position for the Centre of what you think a new government should have on their agenda (consider what community consultation you might need)
- Send a letter or make an appointment to meet with the relevant candidates to let them know about these issues and actions and garner their support for them if they get elected

Remember to make sure that the issues you are raising can be dealt with by that level of government.

Before an election is also a time when funds may be made available for a range of community projects.

You are more likely to be listened to more carefully prior to an election than at any other time. Let your candidates know what the community needs.

*“Neighbourhood Centres can be the mouse that roars. We carry the voice of the community and a positive relationship with a politician gives the community’s voice the best chance that it has. It’s core business for a neighbourhood centre to engage with politicians as critical stakeholders to our work.”*

Kath Harrison  
Belong Blue Mountains

# SUMMING UP

There is a lot of information in this Guide, as well as useful tips and advice, which we hope helps your Centre engage more effectively with your local political representatives. Finally, here are 5 key ways to approach engaging with elected representatives:

## **PATIENTLY**

Building a relationship with politicians takes time. Don't overwhelm the politician with information or requests. Focus on the key pieces information that will communicate exactly what you want to say at a particular point in time. Be conscious of when your local council meets, and when state and federal parliaments sit.

## **STRATEGICALLY**

Having a plan is very useful. Include strategies for engaging with your elected representatives in your regular planning sessions as well as develop a separate plan focused on actions to engage local representatives. Start with long-term goals, then map out the steps that can be taken to get there. Return to the strategy each year and review how it went. Revise as necessary.

## **PURPOSEFULLY**

It's really easy to engage with a politician and think that the engagement itself was a positive outcome. This may be true in initial stages, where you might not ever have met the politician before or engaged with them, but interaction swiftly becomes pointless if it is not purposeful. Have a clear idea about what you want, and make sure the politician knows it too right up front.

## **REGULARLY**

This is possibly the most important point. Regular meaningful contact is vital to maintaining strong relationships. When you build your engagement plan, make sure it includes diarising regular contact points between you and local representatives.

## **PERSONALLY**

Engaging with politicians, like pretty much everything else, is all about personal relationships. Focus on areas of common interest between your Centre and the politician. Try and get representatives personally involved with the Centre.

# **CHECKLIST: HEALTH CHECK ON YOUR CENTRE'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH LOCAL POLITICIANS**

## **COLLECTING LOCAL INFORMATION**

What opportunities does your Centre create to enable local people to participate in discussions about what happens in their community and the priorities of the Centre?

How does the Centre document this information in an easy to understand format to provide to politicians and others when needed? How often is it updated?

What information is on the Centre's website? How often is it updated?

## **LOCAL COUNCIL**

- What is the name of the Mayor?
- What is the name of the Councillor(s) that cover your community
- What are their party affiliations
- When was the last time you met with them
- Do they know about the Centre and what it does and can they articulate this
- Do you have their contact details
- Do you know their office managers

## **STATE AND FEDERAL MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT**

- What is the name of your electorate
- What is the name of your State MP and are they in government, opposition or cross bench
- Is it a marginal/ swinging/safe seat
- Are they a Minister, Parliamentary Secretary or on any committees – which ones
- Do they know about the Centre and can articulate what it does
- Do you have their local contact details
- When was the last time you met with them
- What is the name of the person who runs the local office?

## **WHO ARE THE OTHER PEOPLE OF INFLUENCE IN THE COMMUNITY?**

# CHECKLIST: MEETING WITH A POLITICIAN

Use this checklist to help you plan for the meeting

## BEFORE THE MEETING

- Be prepared - why you are meeting and what are the three outcome(s) you want to achieve
- Decide who will be attending and what they will say, nominate a leader for the meeting and
- who will take notes
- Prepare materials to handout at the meeting – fact sheets, dot point notes of the things you want the politician to remember, do or consider. Make sure one of the sheets has names and phone numbers and the Centre's address
- Confirm meeting date, time and location with the politician's office – let them know who is coming and their positions and what the meeting is about. Don't forget to leave your contact details in case something happens

## AT THE MEETING

- Be polite and friendly, introduce everyone who is attending
- Be upfront and clear about the things you want to discuss
- Take notes on commitments, key statements and issues
- Confirm any commitments and follow up actions at the end of the meeting
- Thank the politician for their time
- Set another meeting time if that's appropriate

## AFTER THE MEETING

- Immediately write up any notes/outcomes of the meeting as a formal report - this could be tabled to the Board?
- Follow up with Politician's office to confirm commitments made
- Report on the outcomes to relevant parties eg Board and staff, other partner organisations

## **FACT SHEET: INTRODUCING NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRES**

Neighbourhood and Community Centres are community led, not-for-profit organisations that work with local people to build safe, strong, resilient and connected communities. They are place based and deeply rooted in their local community, forming a part of the essential social infrastructure in a community.

The main functions of Neighbourhood Centres are:

- social research and planning
- service development and delivery
- community activities
- community information, education and advocacy.

Neighbourhood Centres usually have a strong community development approach that builds the capacity of vulnerable individuals and families to participate in community life.

Because they reflect the diverse needs of the community, each Neighbourhood Centre is different. They are agile organisations, providing timely responses to local issues and implementing a broad range of government welfare and community services that enhance the wellbeing and economic and social resilience of communities. There is no one size fits all. Neighbourhood Centres reflect the communities they operate in.

These multi-purpose organisations provide sustainable, local community infrastructure for the provision of government funded services to support families and communities including:

- disability support services
- childcare services
- aged care services
- financial counselling
- community activities

A local Neighbourhood and Community Centre also acts as a first responder to individuals and families facing difficulties. Centres are a soft entry point to the social welfare and support system and can triage clients and where required, make referrals to other professional services or government agencies.

In NSW there are about 200 Neighbourhood and Community Centres located across the state. Based on 2020 LCSA data collection, 40% of these are located in the metropolitan area, 40% are located in regional areas with a population greater than 10,000 and 20% are in small rural locations. About 50% of the income received by Centres is provided through the NSW State Government. Only 15% of Centres have full time staff with most staff being part time or casual. Not all Centres are funded by the government. Centres can range in size from a part time staff member to over 60 staff and upwards of 100 volunteers.

Centres have the unique ability to value add to government funding by securing further investment from the public private and philanthropic sectors. Their work is supported by a large and increasing number of volunteers and many Centres receive financial and in kind support from private businesses.

The Local Community Services Association (LCSA) is the peak body representing and supporting Neighbourhood and Community Centres across NSW.