



Making A Difference

Lobbying has a bad name - and rightly so, if it is about buying influence or exclusive access. Scottish churches have been part of the campaign for an open and accessible Parliament, and we cannot undermine that by seeking special influence. But lobbying is also about persuading decision-makers. At the burning bush, God called Moses to go and "lobby" Pharaoh - "let my people go"; not just to preach about the evils of slavery or write a report on it but to persuade Pharaoh to do it.

Because of our commitment to the welfare of our nation (and especially those most vulnerable or excluded within the nation) Scottish churches (and individual Christians) want to lobby the Scottish Parliament as effectively as possible. Parliament does its job much better when we (and others) make that contribution on the basis of our experience, reflection and vision - a truly participative Parliament makes better decisions.

That partnership between people and Parliament is the context for our lobbying, and it is a demanding one. One of the perils of supporting a minority football team is not only that the players might hear what you shout at them but they might even do what you ask. A participative Parliament demands much more of us than abuse from the sidelines!

This briefing is aimed at helping churches, committees, groups and individual Christians to make an effective contribution to the political process.

The enclosed flowchart shows the pattern of Parliament's legislative procedure, and the windows of opportunity at different stages. You don't need to be an expert on procedure to make a contribution, but you should get advice about what can be done when (from SCPO or elsewhere).

Most "lobbying" is reactive - responding to proposals for policy or legislation, or to consultation papers - but it is also possible to be proactive, even on an issue not currently on the Parliament's agenda. This could mean anything from talking to your MSP to sending copies of a report to members of a Parliamentary Committee, or presenting a petition to Parliament. First, there are questions you need to ask yourself (or discuss in your committee).

1. What is the issue?

Although the Scottish Parliament can discuss anything it wishes, its legislative powers are limited. The Scotland Act defines powers reserved to Westminster (eg general taxation and foreign policy), and you should decide whether the Scottish Parliament is the right forum for what you want to say.

2. What do you want to say?

If you can't express it crisply and simply yourself, you are unlikely to catch the attention of politicians or civil servants. Of course, not everything fits into a soundbite and there is a vital place for longer reports targeted at those who will be interested. Consultation responses should be submitted in time and address the questions posed (although wider/deeper issues can also be raised at this stage). Briefing papers which offer sound evidence for your case - experience and research (including some statistics and vivid examples) - will be useful tools for MSPs; and a constructive argument offering alternative solutions is more likely to be fruitful. But you have to catch attention first, and then balance the need for a deeper analysis with the likelihood of its being read.

3. What do you want to achieve?

Are you just wanting to show what your Committee is doing, or do you want to point out a problem which Parliament should look at? Do you have specific proposals for Executive action or Parliamentary legislation, or do you want to express a viewpoint on a current proposal? Do you want your MSP to support a particular proposal, or do you want to change someone's mind on an issue? (Like the rest of us, politicians who have said something publicly don't often change their view. That's not to say it isn't worth trying, but it needs careful thought and imagination to be effective - better to get in before minds are made up). Make it clear what response you are looking for.

4. What kind of contact?

Depending on your objectives, you should think about whether a letter, email or phone-call would be most appropriate. Other possibilities would include arranging a meeting (presenting a briefing face-to-face is more likely to be effective), or inviting someone to speak at your event or to visit your project to see what you are talking about.

5. Who should you contact?

(a) Individual MSPs

You can contact your constituency or regional MSPs either by letter or e-mail to their Parliamentary address (The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP; email addresses are all firstname.surname.msp@scottish.parliament.uk) or by attending a local "surgery" (advertised in local papers, etc). MSPs do take account of constituents' views and can get answers for you from Ministers or may even ask Parliamentary questions on issues you raise.

You also have seven regional MSPs covering your region, probably of different parties from your constituency MSP. You can contact them on the same terms as your constituency MSP. Churches may also want to contact MSPs they know to be sympathetic or interested, either in general or on a particular issue. However, remember no MSP will take up a local issue outwith their own area.

MSPs also have assistants and/or researchers (locally based or at Parliament). They can be a buffer or a good way into contact; they may well have time to read something and pass on information to their bosses, so don't give up if you feel "fobbed off" with a researcher.

(b) Parliamentary Committees

If the issue you are raising is being discussed by a Parliamentary Committee, or is within their remit, you should contact the Committee through its clerk; you can also contact individual members of the Committee (all Committees have representatives of each of the four main parties). Some Committees may have appointed "Reporters" - members of the Committee who will take the lead on a particular issue; these could be key people to make contact with. Full details of Committees are available from SCPO.

Committees take written and/or oral evidence on topics they are dealing with. If you want to give oral evidence (it might be a better way to put your case, but you need to be ready for the possibility of tough questions), you will have to make a case for why your group should be heard, and decide who should speak for you - normally a maximum of three people from any organisation.

Committee meetings are open to the public - see Parliament's website for details of meetings, or from SCPO - but you'll need to order a ticket in advance as space is very limited (phone 0131 348 5000). You can get minutes or full Official Reports of Committee Meetings on the Parliamentary website or from the Stationery Office.

(c) Cross-party Groups

A wide range of cross-party groups focus on particular areas of common interest (eg international development, refugees). Such groups bring interested people outwith Parliament together with MSPs,

and that involvement with the MSPs most interested in your issue could be very valuable. Details of groups are on the Parliament's website or available from SCPO.

(d) Scottish Executive

Politically, the Scottish Government is a minority government with the Scottish National Party in power. The Government (Ministers and civil servants) have the key responsibilities for policy and implementation, for which Ministers are accountable to Parliament; most proposals for legislation will be brought by the Government (after consultation) to Parliament for enacting. Details of Ministers and their responsibilities are available from SCPO.

Obviously, Ministers will be important people to invite to key meetings and (for those who regularly work in their areas of responsibility) to build good working relationships with. SCVO's guide to lobbying says "Government Ministers are the most obvious targets, and often the hardest to get to. It may be easier, or more appropriate, to meet with a Deputy Minister. In either case, it is important to present a good reason for the meeting, and why it needs to be with them rather than anyone else. Bear in mind that, although they are designated to speak on a given issue, they may well not have your level of technical expertise. What you present needs to be accessible, but not patronising".

Ministers are also MSPs, and you should make it clear whether you are contact them as Minister or as constituency/regional MSP.

Civil Servants are not (in theory) policy makers and should not therefore be "lobbied", but good relationships will be helpful for these in regular contact. They are key sources of factual information (remember the Freedom of Information Act), and often will be able to discuss technical details of policy proposals and come to meetings to discuss consultation papers or new Bills.

Spokespersons on specific issues are also appointed by other parties. Generally they will be easier to arrange meetings with, but of course do not make the crucial decisions.

Whoever you are contacting, remember that this should be a two-way relationship. Your experience and expertise can help MSPs do their job, so think about what will be helpful for them as well as putting your own case. That will include thinking about their interests, their constituency, their party and its line, etc. What can you offer?

Petitions

The Scottish Parliament has a Public Petitions Committee, whose task is to make sure you get a proper response to your petition (though it may not be the one you hoped for). There is no requirement for any specific number of signatures - you can present your own petition, but it must be in the correct form, which can either be on paper, or in the form of an online e-petition. Guidance is available from the Parliamentary Committee, or from clerks, or from SCPO. This is an effective way of getting a new issue on to the agenda, but not the best way to influence a debate that's already under way.

Political Parties

Parties are part of the political reality, as alliances of broadly like-minded people (with an internal loyalty and discipline). Many Christians are involved in political parties - they are not necessarily dens of iniquity! But churches are rightly careful about pursuing causes that seem to identify them with one party. On the one hand, we cannot stop saying what we believe just because it becomes the view of one party and not another; on the other hand, we don't want to be hijacked into a party political cause, and lobbying that is seen as party-biased will be less effective.

Party allegiance will also be relevant in deciding who to contact. Try to get the right balance between "preaching to the converted" (who will be able to take your case forward) and banging your head against a brick wall of opposition (whose minds you will be trying to change).

Media

"Using" the media (from local papers to national TV) can be an effective way of communicating with politicians as part of a campaign. If you can point to coverage that your report or event got, or even

get a letter into a newspaper, that will help ensure that politicians take note; but this can be risky and has its own strategy which needs a bit of careful thinking out.

Getting Advice

If all this sounds intimidating, don't be put off. Parliament needs your participation and provides good information on its website and through "Partner Libraries" in each constituency - there will be one near you. The Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office exists to enable the churches to make a good contribution to the process and can advise you on how to go about making your point.

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Parliament also has its own internal information service (SPICe), and they will be happy to receive copies of important briefing papers, etc. They will keep them in the Parliamentary Library and may use them in the briefings they prepare for MSPs. Send two copies to SPICe, Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP.

Ten Commandments for Lobbying

- 1. Don't abuse your opponents or demonise them; remember that they want to make a difference too, and many of them are Christians trying to live out their vocation.**
- 2. Don't write the letter that will make you feel good - write the one that will make a difference by persuading someone.**
- 3. Don't be afraid to express your faith and vision - but remember that not everyone will share it.**
- 4. Don't talk about things you don't honestly know about, and don't exaggerate.**
- 5. Don't undermine your own integrity - and that of MSPs - by your tactics, and don't offer MSPs anything which could be seen as a "bribe"**
- 6. If you're speaking on behalf of a group or other body, make sure you have the proper authority.**
- 7. Get in touch with others who might be allies.**
- 8. Remember that a few words at the right time will be more effective than too many words mistimed; and your own words, carefully written, will be more effective than a standard letter or postcard**
- 9. Don't let criticism be your only contact with your MSP(s), or only get in touch with you want something; good relationships bear fruit.**
- 10. Pray for the people you are contacting, and for others involved in decision-making on the issue.**

And remember ... please let SCPO know what you are doing!

**The SCPO serves Scotland's Churches
(administered by The Church of Scotland, Scottish Charity No SC011353)**

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Tel: 0131 558 8137

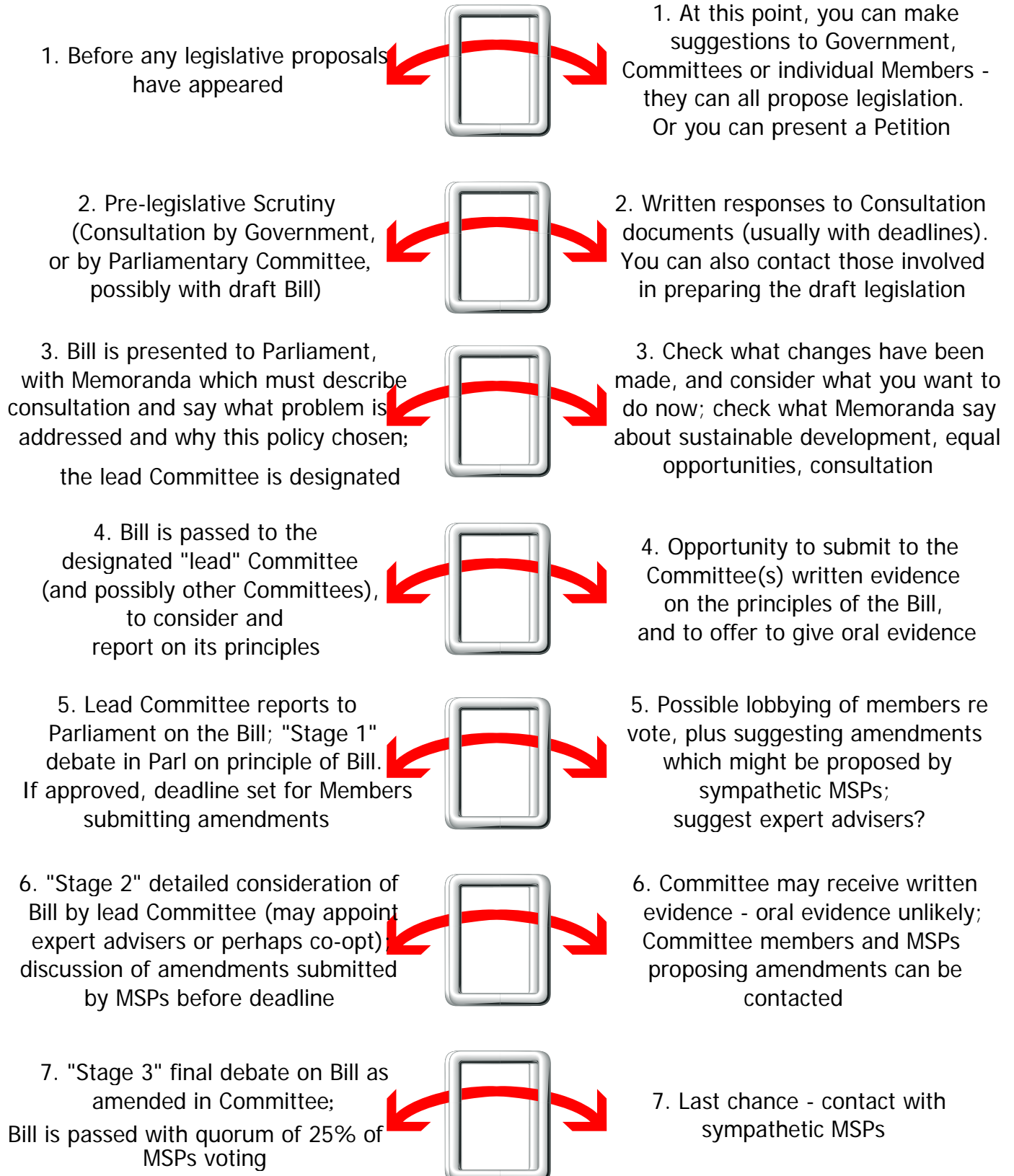
Email: info@actsparl.org

Website: www.actsparl.org

Windows into the Parliamentary Process or How to Help the Scottish Parliament make Better Laws

Parliamentary Process

Participative Action



NB: the earlier in the process you are able to make a constructive suggestion, the more chance of making a difference