

A handy guide to: Making the most of officials

Official representatives from central or local Government, or from service providers, can have mixed feelings about attending meetings with members of the public. They value the insights and expertise they will gain, but may be nervous about how they will be received. This short guide provides a perspective largely drawn from an official of the Scottish Government who has had considerable experience of working with older people; his notes are an excellent summary of what officials from a wide variety of organisations would like you to know when you speak to them.

Engaging with Government – some tips for activists

- Don't assume that we are hostile, but recognise that we may have little understanding of the practical issue(s) you face.
- Don't assume that our lack of knowledge means we are not interested, or that we don't care. We are likely to have a wide range of responsibilities, and to be busy people under a lot of pressure.
- Don't put us off by being antagonistic - we may be more nervous about meeting you than you are about meeting us! Be helpful and informative so we find the meeting useful and productive; that way we will want to keep the dialogue going.
- Do try and put us at our ease. Smile and nod when you agree with what we say. It will make it easier for us to discuss what we might not agree with, and to try to understand your point of view, if we know that you appreciate we have made the effort to come.
- Try to define what you can do to help us to do our job. If you make our meeting together worthwhile and productive, we will have a reason to work with you in the future, and use your expertise.
- Once we have established a working relationship, you need to adopt a different approach. If you bang your fists on the table and shout at us, we might not want to invite you again!
- Think about who can do what in the older people community to influence change. If you have a place on our working group, you shouldn't be lobbying us as well – let other people do that.
- Telling us about older people's experiences is a good way of engaging our interest, and helping us understand the relevance of older people's issues

to our policy areas. You might not have much hard data but people's stories are really powerful.

- Don't just present us with problems - try to identify practical solutions too. Help us to think about what we can do to help achieve what you want, and what's in it for us!
- Make an effort to understand the constraints that we work within – it will not be in our power to meet all of your demands straight away.
- Be realistic, and try to focus on the main priorities, rather than asking for everything all at once. Try and argue how these things fit with/contribute to our bigger objectives and commitments.
- When you meet us, try to present a coherent case. Keep the points clear and easy to follow. We want to understand what you actually want us to do.
- Make it easier for us to feel confident that you have wide support from other older people. Show that you have consulted other older people and groups and forums, and reached points of agreement. Don't have arguments with others in front of us. Presenting us with a consensus is very powerful.
- Aim to become a trusted source of expertise that we can turn to, and we are much more likely to ask you to help inform policy development.
- Be persistent – it takes time to build capacity, build relationships and demonstrate progress.