



Working with your MP

Seeking influence

Race for Justice is aiming to reach and influence policy and decision makers throughout government and the criminal justice system (CJS). But Members of Parliament (MPs) are one group of people that local organisations can engage with to spread the word about the campaign and local activity concerning BME groups and the CJS.

Remember, though, that when the campaign launches in September 2008, Parliament is in recess and MPs don't return to Westminster until October. However, you may still be able to reach your MP through his or her local office.

If you're not sure who your MP is or how you can get in touch, go to www.writetothem.com to find the names of your local MP, MEP (Member of the European Parliament) and local councillors.

Why bother?

Your local MP may be able to help you in more ways than you think, but like any other part of your campaign activity, you should think through what you want to achieve.

The easiest way to contact them is to write a letter or send an email, although a face to face meeting is probably the most effective way to get your message across. Remember, though, that not all MPs will be sympathetic to your cause, but as a constituent you have every right to be heard and to state your case.

Inside Parliament, MPs could do the following:

- send a letter to the relevant government department
- write to the relevant minister
- see the minister personally
- ask a written or oral parliamentary question
- start or sign an Early Day Motion
- ask for an Adjournment Debate
- speak in a government debate

- use their influence on a Committee or All-Party Group
- respond to a Green or White paper, draft Bill or Committee Inquiry.

Outside Parliament, there are other ways that MPs could support you and your organisation. For example:

- attend, open, chair or speak at an event in the constituency
- issue a press release or supply a quote for yours
- write to the local media or local authority
- sign a pledge in support of the campaign.

Tips to influence your MP

It's all about timing

Remember that the Race for Justice campaign will launch on 18 September 2008, so that will be a good time to reach out. Around this time, we'll be trying to raise the issue of race, ethnicity and the criminal justice system higher up the policy agenda.

Be prepared

What do you know about your local MP? It's worth finding out some details about where they stand on criminal justice issues and what arguments they are likely to find most persuasive.

Make a strong case

Include some of the facts and figures in this campaign guide to make a hard hitting case. Make your points clear and memorable, backed up with solid information. People understandably feel very emotional about this subject, but your MP may respond best to a well reasoned argument.

Remember this is all about people

Remind your MP that real people are suffering because of inequalities in the criminal justice system. To get a fair hearing, however, you mustn't forget about the victims of crime; many MPs will be reluctant to support what they may perceive to be a 'criminals' against 'victims' campaign. Remember, it's about the unequal treatment BME groups receive across the whole criminal justice system. If you have individual examples, this may strengthen your case.

Be persistent and patient

Remember that most MPs are inundated with requests for support from a variety of worthy causes. If you don't have a relationship with him or her already, it may be worth trying to develop.

Keeping in touch with the campaign

Make sure you've signed up to receive campaign updates via the website – www.raceforjustice.net. We'll inform you of any developments, new research, and provide other information to help you with your own campaigning.

Writing a letter to your MP

Remember that MPs only respond to enquiries from their own constituents, so make sure you target the right person. It's worth writing to your MP whatever party they belong to as cross-party support for the issue is crucial.

Try to follow the following tips:

- Be brief and compelling – ideally on one side of A4 (see example)
- Make it personal to them – so it doesn't seem like a standard, pro-forma letter
- State clearly what it is you are doing and mention the involvement of any other local organisations
- State what it is you would like them to do or say to help
- Ask for a reply
- If appropriate and if you want one, ask for a meeting.

Sample letter to MP

Your contact details

Date

Dear <named MP>

I am writing to let you know about Race for Justice, a campaign highlighting the inequalities faced by black and ethnic minority groups in the criminal justice system. Did you know that:

- One in four prisoners in England and Wales is from an ethnic minority group – while ethnic minorities form just 11% of the population
- Ethnic minorities are more likely to be stopped and searched, charged rather than cautioned and remanded in custody rather than bailed

We do not believe that ethnic minority groups are any more likely to be criminals or break the law than the white population. We believe that these figures indicate that something is wrong with the criminal justice system.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss the campaign and its relevance to your constituency and to explain what we are doing to help. In the local area we are <brief details of what you are doing>.

I look forward to hearing from you. In the meantime, you can find out more about the campaign on www.raceforjustice.net and about our organisation on <your contact details>

Yours sincerely

Meeting your MP

You can meet your MP at their local surgery in their constituency – most MPs hold these regularly – or at the Houses of Parliament in London. If you manage to secure a meeting, you have a great opportunity to state your case.

Before the meeting:

- Rehearse what it is you want to say
- Think through common counter arguments and prepare answers in advance
- If you go as a group, assign roles eg someone to do most of the speaking, someone else to take notes. It's probably best not to take too many people into the meeting as your MP may feel intimidated.

During the meeting:

- Get straight to the point and be convincing
- Understand your MP's view – engage rather than confront
- Write down what your MP says
- Don't be intimidated or derailed – your MP is there to serve you
- Try to get a commitment to support you by doing something.

After the meeting:

- Write to thank your MP
- Briefly restate your key points and confirm any action you agreed.

And remember

- Contact Clinks for further help and support.
- Sign up to the campaign on www.raceforjustice.net to ensure you receive regular campaign updates by email.