

Engaging local politicians

A training seminar for Scotland's Improvement
Districts

March 2021

A little about us

- Award winning Edinburgh-based strategic communications firm - since 2012
- Specialise in corporate public relations and political relations
- Working with STP and Scotland's Improvement Districts to provide high level communications support and training
- Find out more - www.messagematters.co.uk

About the webinar

- Available on the resources page after the event
- Slides available on resources page
- Get involved
 - Ask questions on your Zoom app
 - Email questions live to clare@messagematters.co.uk
- Wrap up in under an hour
- Informal and interactive

What we'll cover

- The basics...
 - Why and who should you engage with
 - About your audience
 - Understanding the different tiers of government
 - Top Tips
 - Responding to a crisis
- Questions

Why/who should you engage with?

- Politicians are influential with your core audience - local people, levy payers, government officials
- Consider it as part of a wider strategy, and ensure you have a message
- Politicians have the power to help resolve some of your barriers to success, or cause issues
- They have large social media followings, and make good channels for your message
- They are influential with local media and can inflame or deflate a story
- Who are they? MPs, MSPs, Councillors, Council officials

About your audience

- Making the most of your relationships is about understanding your audience, and tailoring your message
- Politicians are very busy people, have vastly differing backgrounds and interests, and want to show their constituents they are working for them
- Find out about them - background, issues, geography, committees
- Tailor your message - how are you helping them to do their job?

Understanding local government

- Councillors elected every five years - mostly part-time positions - all 32 councils funded mostly through Scottish Government block grant funding and council tax
- Provost is the elected Convener, Leader of the Council is the representative of the largest political grouping - business done through plenary and committees - each Council has slightly different procedures (get to know how it works - the website will tell you)
- Councils can be made up of coalitions of different parties/independents
- Council officials are often as important for “getting things done”

Understanding local government

- Councillors are elected through multi-member wards - make sure you check which wards your BID covers so you're engaging with the right people
- A lot of the issues that pertain to BIDs will be dealt with on various Committees, including economic development, transport etc - the Ward Councillors may not always be on these Committees, but it's important to keep them in the loop
- Take the time to research your local council infrastructure and see where different issues are dealt with

Understanding MSPs and MPs

- Each BID will have at least one constituency MSP (potentially more depending on your boundaries) and several other regional MSPs. You will also have an MP. You can find out who they are on the Scottish Parliament and House of Commons website.
- Whilst MSPs and MPs tend to deal with more national issues, they like to get involved in local projects and be seen to be deeply involved in local communities.
- Where issues can become tangled or stuck in local government, often MSPs and MPs can help. It's important to build relationships with local politicians of all levels.
- Positive relationships with MSPs and MPs can reap benefits when it comes to changes in national policy. Parliamentarians like to refer to their constituents when formulating and debating policy, so it pays to help them understand the impact of policy on the ground.

Elections - impact on your engagement

- Elections for the UK and Scottish parliaments and local government take place every 5 years
 - 6 May 2021 - Scottish Parliament
 - 2022 - Local Government
 - 2024 - UK Parliament
- Rules of engagement in the run-up to an election
- Keep an eye on election results and respond as appropriate - who is new, returning, or retiring? Who has lost their seat?
- The period immediately following an election is an excellent time to engage

Top tips (1)

- **They will be interested** - you don't need to be afraid, it's their job to know what's going on in the local area.
- **Get to know them** - politicians are just people. Get to know them, and you'll figure out what works best for them in terms of maintaining an ongoing dialogue.
- **Engage during "peace time"** - it doesn't come across well to make your first interaction with a politician when you need their help.

Top tips (2)

- **Manage your expectations** - politicians don't have the answers for everything. They will do what they can, but there may be times when all they can offer is advice.
- **Be prepared** - make sure you attend any meeting prepared. Know the answer to the questions "why have you come to see me?" and "how can I help?".
- **Be courteous with timing** - local politicians are often under pressure from lots of different groups. If you have something important coming up that will impact their work, a polite "heads up" will be appreciated.
- **They are very busy people** - most politicians have very busy lives. Be mindful of this in your requests for their time.

Top tips (3)

- **Be responsive** - if a local politician asks you for an update, be timely in your response. Even if you can't answer the question, acknowledge the request and say you'll get back to them as soon as you can.
- **Work positively together** - it's important you work with all the parties represented in your area. If you have an issue, make every attempt to work through it constructively as opposed to resorting to public criticism.
- **They can be great ambassadors** - politicians often have very wide networks on social media etc. If you can persuade them to share information for you, it will reach many more people as a result.

Possible case studies

- Easing of restrictions on shops, hospitality and recreation
- Launching a new street market initiative
- Some negative local press about internal transparency issues
- You have an objection to a local planning application
- You want to update them on your work
- A politician makes a negative remark about your BID on social media

Lobbying Register

- If you lobby Members of the Scottish Parliament, Scottish Ministers or their Special Advisers, your activity may be subject to regulation and therefore registrable on the Scottish Lobbying Register.
- Regulated lobbying is that which:
 - Takes place face-to-face (including video conference)
 - By an individual who is paid (directly or indirectly) to make representations to political representatives on behalf of their organisation
- There are various exemptions in place which, in most cases, will exempt BIDs from having to register.
- Be sure to consult these resources to find out whether your activity is registrable:

<https://archive2021.parliament.scot/gettinginvolved/105978.aspx>

Three golden rules

- 1. Make friends in peacetime**
- 2. Keep in touch consistently**
- 3. Treat everyone equally**

Your Questions

Thanks!

We're here to help!

Get in touch - info@messagematters.co.uk

