

Meeting with your Member of Parliament

Meeting face-to-face allows you to engage directly with your MP and forces them to think about the issue. This might be the first time they'll have heard from someone who has experienced an eating disorder, and they may even have some misconceptions. This contact, and hearing your experiences, will help them to understand eating disorders on a more personal level. It also helps to show your passion about making change, which can be very persuasive.

You have written to your MP and arranged a meeting. What do you do now?

Before the meeting – Preparation

Know the issue – It's good to go into the meeting with a good understanding of local issues and how these fit into the national picture. For example, knowing how the services in your area are performing against waiting times targets can be helpful if you're discussing how early access to treatment needs to be improved in your area.

Your MP might want to probe further, and could ask more difficult questions. If you don't know the answer or how to respond, don't worry – you are not expected to be a policy expert. Beat can help you prepare and gather information in advance, and can help you answer questions after the meeting. Just let the team know who your MP is and when you are meeting with them by emailing campaigning@beateatingdisorders.org.uk.

Agenda – Make a clear plan of what you want to cover in the meeting and how you want to structure your time. Try to allow time for discussion and questions. An appointment at an MP's surgery usually lasts around 10-15 minutes, but you can clarify how long it will last when you arrange the meeting so that you can plan accordingly.

It can be useful to have some facts and statistics, but try not to rely on them completely, as these can be impersonal. It will be important to share your story, saying what matters to you and why, to make the issue real to your MP.

Think about what you want your MP to do to help and what action you want them to take. This could be to contact your local Clinical Commissioning Group to discuss services in your area, writing to the Secretary of State for Health to bring policy related matters to their attention, speaking at an event, or raising the issue in the media.

Agree roles – If you are attending the meeting with another person, discuss who will say what, and how you can support each other best during the meeting. It is also courteous to let the MP know who will be attending with you.

Practice – Spend some time going through what you plan to say. This will help you to feel more confident when speaking during the meeting.

Handouts – Having any information you wish to refer to during the meeting printed for yourself is a good idea – this can be especially helpful for keeping you on point and if your mind goes blank. It can be really helpful to prepare a handout with your key points, so that you can leave this with your MP at the end of the meeting. They might not know a lot about eating disorders, so if you can bring the issue to life and then leave them with further information that is a great start. This handout can be a good place to include some relevant facts and statistics. Beat can provide you with some key information about eating disorders and your local area to help with this.

During your meeting

The beginning – Introduce yourself and explain why you have arranged the meeting. Thank your MP for meeting with you, and for any supportive action they have taken on this issue before.

The middle – Try to stick to your planned agenda, keeping your points clear and concise to ensure you get time for discussion and questions. This is where some practice in advance will help.

Your MP might have a different view to you, so it's important to get your views across while remaining calm and listening to what they have to say. If they have any tricky questions, don't worry if you can't answer. You can only speak about your own experiences. Tell your MP you will find out the answer and send them further information. This is also a great excuse to follow up and build a relationship with their office.

The end – Explain what can be done to improve the situation, and ask them to take action. Be clear in your requests about what you would like them to do to help.

At the end of the meeting, leave them with a handout or information sheet summarising your key points.

After the meeting

Congratulate yourself – Meeting with your MP is a huge achievement, and a great step in getting them to support action on eating disorders! We'd love to hear how it went – you can get in touch with the team by emailing campaigning@beateatingdisorders.org.uk.

Send a thank you – After the meeting, send them an email or letter thanking them for meeting with you. This can be a good time to send over any additional information. You can also gently remind them what they have agreed to do and let them know that you will follow up in a few weeks.

Follow up – If you haven't had an update on what your MP said they would do, get in touch to follow them up and see what progress they have made.

Top tips

- MPs have packed diaries, so don't stand them up and make sure you are on time.
- Make sure you know where you need to go, how to get there and how long your travel will take. Try to allow yourself a little extra time before your appointment – that will reduce stress if anything goes wrong along the way.
- Be polite. A good start could help this develop into a positive and productive relationship.
- MPs' secretaries and researchers are usually the first point of contact, manage MP diaries and sort their mail. Be extra nice and they'll make it all much easier!