



**Local Heritage
Engagement
Network**

Toolkit

No. 6

**Writing to
your local MP
or Councillor:
What to say and
how to say it**

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Contents

This document will:

- **Explain how and when writing to local representatives may be useful**
- **Provide tips for what to say and how to say it**
- **Provide some sample letter/email templates which you can adapt to your purposes**



Why write letters/emails?

Introduction

Writing a letter or email is one of the simplest and most common ways to get your voice heard by decision makers on any issue. You can send a letter or email to almost anyone you can think of who is in a public position and, on the whole, you can be assured that it will be read. Letters have a real chance to make an impact – either by striking a chord with an individual and opening their eyes to an important issue, or by showing, through volume, just how many people care about a specific subject.

Every citizen has the right to contact their democratic representatives; in local councils, in Parliament, and in the European Parliament. You do not need to be an *'expert'* to have a valuable impact – simply stating why something matters to you, and backing up your convictions with relevant evidence, is enough.

Politicians are not experts in all issues. Many Councillors and MPs will have little or no in-depth knowledge of heritage issues or archaeology. Many will not understand how archaeology services work, and will not have spent a great deal of time thinking about the impacts that things like construction and development have on the historic environment, nor the contribution heritage makes to the distinctiveness of the places where people live. Repeating these arguments on paper or by email, and showing that they are issues of public interest, is vital to achieving success in efforts to lobby politicians to maintain and enhance protections for heritage.

It is a simple truth that the more politicians come across an issue raised by their constituents, the more they will take note when it crosses their paths in future. Raising an issue in a letter brings it to the forefront, and a well-timed or well-written letter or email may stick in the mind. Today, emails are just as effective as written letters, and many politicians prefer them.



What to write

This section will examine:

- *How to set objectives in your correspondence*
- *How to set the right tone and style*
- *Getting the content right*

Objectives:

Firstly, think about how you want to influence the situation you are in. Most letters will be intended to inform and subsequently to influence the opinion, or perhaps the actions, of the recipient. In some cases, recipients will not know the extent of the issue you are raising, or its impacts of citizens. In other instances they may be aware, but will benefit from seeing the scale of public interest. However, informing alone is not likely to be an optimum objective. Some viable objectives are:

- To prompt the representative to respond on an issue (with their personal views, extra information, or further comment)
- To influence the representative to support a particular policy/vote a particular way
- To influence your representative to raise an issue in debate/with colleagues or superiors
- To influence your representative to mention a case/example in Council or Parliament
- To influence your representative to take direct action on your behalf (e.g. to visit a site, campaign, promote on social media, etc.)
- To develop relationships with your representative to facilitate future interactions with your group

If you are writing on an issue that allows you to mention the work of the CBA, or other heritage body, your MP or Councillor may express an interest in working with us. If this happens, please let us know!

There are ways for your MP to be more involved with archaeology or heritage issues. They may wish to join a group such as the [All Party Parliamentary Archaeology Group](#), which meets in Westminster and discusses archaeological policy issues. You may wish to encourage your MP to attend these or other meetings.

When considering your objective, bear in mind:

- What has happened (context)
- Who is affected (people and things)
- When and where will it/has it happened
- How can the situation be resolved *in your opinion*?

Tone and style tips:

- **DO keep it short:** MPs in particular get a huge amount of post/email and unless there is a very good reason for more detail, short letters are always better.
 - If you have large amounts of information to share, consider appending it to the letter (i.e. write a one or two page letter and then, beneath the signature, include the extra information/attached publication)
 - Usually two or three specific points to explain your position is optimum. Use of bullet-points is in many cases recommended.
 - Stick to one issue per letter.
- **DO keep it civil:** Your letter will be much less effective if you are hostile or aggressive. Make your point with fair reference to restrictions, other points of view, or relevant challenges faced. Try not to be overtly political, as this rarely helps. Be courteous, and say thank you!
- **DO draw on personal experiences:** The things that you care about and value about your local environment can strike a chord with decision-makers. If you have a particular personal story it is more likely to be remembered.

- **DO your research:** Whilst you don't need to be an expert on an issue, you should try to present a well-informed letter. This means having gone to the effort to research your points. If there are national statistics that back up your claims, they can be very useful to add weight to your argument.

See our other [toolkits](#) for help with research or contact us for advice.

- **DO emphasise positive things:** You may regularly be moved to write a letter only when there is a problem. However, balancing critiques with positive things can help to show your Representative that you are not being unreasonable, and can help to set the tone for a useful ongoing relationship.

Some people are able to develop positive relationships with their MP through regular communication, such that they expect and value comments on a particular issue – e.g. heritage. One thing which many people do not do is to write specifically when the MP does something good. Positive reinforcement is extremely valuable!

- **DO follow up:** If you receive a response, you can send a follow up letter/email to thank them for their response and possibly reply further, or reiterate questions which remain unanswered. It is often this second letter which elicits the most personal response!
- **DO note down any comments made by your recipients:** It is useful to record responses for future reference.
- **DO share your letter:** Sending your letter to others or posting it online (via Facebook, Twitter, or on a blog, etc.) can help to spread awareness to friends, colleagues, and others in your area.

We always appreciate being sent copies of letters which members of the public have sent to their representatives. You can forward letters to cbacamework@archaeologyuk.org.

- **DO include your name and address:** An obvious point, but your name and address allows the recipient to respond, and confirms you as a constituent/ward member. Most MPs and Councillors simply screen out messages which do not demonstrably come from constituents or members.

- ***DON'T use form/template letters:*** Many groups will encourage supporters to send in 'templated' letters when aiming to elicit responses on particular issues. Evidence shows that these types of letters have a limited impact, unless they are received in huge numbers. A personal letter, even if it is based around similar points, or very short, is a vastly superior instrument. But you can use information provided by experts and quote them.
- ***DON'T write to MPs or Councillors other than your own:*** This may not always be the case, when, for example you have a good reason to raise an issue with a specific portfolio holder, or to invite Councillors to events. However, as a general rule, stick to your own representatives. Most MPs will not read messages from non-constituents.

Contents:

The following list provides a rough breakdown of a possible content structure of a letter, although it does not have to contain all of these elements or in the same order. In some cases, a particular element may be the most important; e.g. if you have a strong personal story to tell, you may not need to assess the political context in detail. However, these 10 points can be helpful to ensure you have appropriate content for your letter:

1. Use a subject line to make the issue clear
2. State purpose/objective clearly at the start of the letter
3. Explain why the issue raised is important
4. Give 1 (minimum) to 3 (maximum) points/examples to contextualize your position
5. Positively recognise any previous actions taken by the recipient
6. Ask for the recipient's opinion or for clarification of their position
7. Request commitment to specific action
8. Give reasons to support particular actions
9. Ask questions which require a response
10. Explicitly request a response

Citizens and their rights:

Citizens have an active voice in the democratic process. This is not confined to voting in elections or other formal opportunities. You are entitled to contact your representatives directly by any of the following means:

- Via direct email or letter to local Councillors, your MP, or MEPs (and MSPs, AMs, NIAMs in Scotland/Wales)
- Attend meetings of your local council and raise questions
- Attend local surgeries held by your MP or Councillors
- Complain to local council officials and to the local ombudsman

NOTE: There is usually no point in contacting someone other than your local representative.

In addition to direct communication, at CBA we have heard groups talk about accusations of 'electioneering' or 'politicking' when citizens have spoken up on issues of interest to them. **These are not terms which have any validity in restricting debate among citizens.** You are entitled to discuss within groups, online forums, or in public places, political issues, regardless of whether you are being constructive. You may exert pressure through a variety of forms as a voluntary group and should have no fears about breaking the law on charities campaigning.

The Lobbying Act 2014 is another instrument which groups have expressed concern about. These rules only apply to groups lobbying for a specific candidate who are spending more than £20,000 on campaigning at particular times in the political calendar (around elections times). It would be virtually impossible for this to apply to local voluntary action on the historic environment.

For more information on the lobbying act visit the NCVO FAQ pages [here](#).



National and local issues

The issue you wish to write about will determine, in a large part, which person it is most useful to contact. Firstly, you need to determine who has the responsibility for dealing with the issue you are interested in.

Who is responsible?

A helpful guide to considering what issues are the responsibility of which level of administration can be found [here](#).

Local heritage issues:

The majority of issues affecting the historic environment are the responsibility of local authorities. For example:

- Processing and determining planning applications
- Maintaining Historic Environment Records (HERs)
- Local plans/strategies
- Local heritage/community strategies
- Financial strategies (i.e. budget cuts proposals)
- Specialist historic environment advice
- Many museums, including museums 'trusts', which often receive public subsidy (excluding national museums: [see list](#), and local volunteer or independent museums)

These issues are all responsibilities of local authority Councillors. Your MP will be unlikely to respond, unless you are linking local issues to national ones, e.g. Central government austerity measures impacting local budgets, or national planning legislation impacting local plan policies.

A note on Council organisation: Depending on the area you live in, you may have both District and County Councillors (two-tier systems), or just County Councillors (unitary authorities) to write to. You may have to do some checking to know for sure whether your local museum or heritage service is managed at a district or county level.

Usually two-tier authorities operate shared services for archaeology and HER management, so these services tend to be managed at County level – although the responsibility is technically that of the District Planning Authority.

On the other hand, planning decisions are taken at district level – the level of most local planning authorities. Officials here deal with planning applications, local plans, housing allocations, etc. Usually Conservation Officers are based at District level.

Museums may be managed at a District or County level. You should check council websites or call the museum directly to confirm. Sometimes the museum buildings may be owned by District councils but managed by County museums services.

If you are in doubt, contact your council on the phone and they will direct you to the correct information.

National issues:

National politics affects the historic environment in various forms, most prominently through legislative processes, national policy and agendas, and budget setting (including setting budgets for local authorities).

- National policy/legislation (e.g. NPPF, Housing and Planning Bill)
- National budget (including local government settlement and agency budgets)
- Government agendas (e.g. housebuilding)
- Most maritime archaeology issues.
- Treasure Act
- European and International conventions

National legislation has an important knock-on effect on heritage at a local level, as it impacts on local authority budgets, planning issues, and charitable funding regulations.



Who to write to

Local Councillors

Local Councillors are your first line representatives within local authorities. There are many reasons why contacting local Councillors may be useful (Note: Councillors in different areas have different responsibilities due to variable authority structures. If you live in a two-tier area you may need to find out whether to contact County or District Councillor).

Councillors will have a particular interest in issues relating to the wards which they represent. They will also be interested in any issue of concern to ward members.

You may also wish to write to a particular Councillor because they sit on a particular committee (such as planning) or holds a particular role (such as Chair of a Culture and Environment group). This can be done by copying the message to your representative to the other person, or requesting that your representative raises the issue personally. This is likely to have more impact than writing solely to a Councillor who does not directly represent you.

You can find out who your local representatives are (Councillors, MPs) by using the search function [here](#) (direct.gov), or [here](#) (TheyWorkForYou.co.uk). The latter site also allows you to easily send an email via their service – although we recommend sending it yourself if possible.

Council executive staff

Council executive staff, such as the Chief Executive, are paid professionals who run the business of the Council. They are useful to contact in addition to the elected members, as they will often know more about the technical details of policy and Council practice.

In many cases Council Executives will be the main authors of particular policies or proposals, and will be responsible for advising elected members in all cases.

Council officers

These are the staff that are responsible for *running* Council services (for example planning officers, HER officers, county archaeological officers, Conservation Officers, community engagement officers, or Finds Liaison Officers (part-funded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme). Many of these specialists have a responsibility to deal with public enquiries and may be able to provide information on their service and may be asked to deal with issues affecting people.

Members of Parliament

Members of Parliament are responsible for representing the issues of their constituents in parliament. MPs should (and mostly do) read through all correspondence from constituents and writing to them can be a good way to influence them.

The MP is the correct person to contact if you have an issue or concern that reflects on a national debate, for instance, on the relaxation of planning regulations.

MPs are similarly interested in things which happen in their local areas (e.g. local archaeological projects, research, or discoveries) particularly if there are superlatives involved (our group found the *oldest* evidence of X... / our county has *the greatest concentrations* of Y...).

MPs may be the point of call for some personal issues (e.g. benefits, visas, etc.) but there are few heritage/archaeology specific local issues which do not fall under the responsibility of local authorities.

MPs have little or no control over issues which are under the control of local authorities. For instance, they are extremely unlikely to make a public statement on issues such as planning cases, local budget cuts, unless they reflect on current national legislative or policy issues. For example; an archaeological issue relevant to the strategic allocation of land may raise important issues which reflect upon government housing agendas or upcoming legislative debates (e.g. Housing and Planning Bill, or National Planning Policy Framework). In these cases it will be vitally important to ensure the correct phrasing to ensure a response.

Heritage Champions

In England Historic England (formerly English Heritage) maintain a scheme whereby they invite local representatives to become the designated Heritage Champion for their Council area. Heritage Champions receive support and training from Historic England and are encouraged to champion historic environment issues within their Councils. These Champions should have an existing interest in the historic environment, as well as training in this area and are therefore potentially good allies when advocating for heritage and archaeology.

A list of authorities which have a Heritage Champion can be found on the Historic England Website. Your Council *should* list who their champion is on the [Heritage Champions website](#) section of their websites. However, some do not, and you may have to call the local authority to ask.

There is some degree of variation over whether Heritage Champions perceive their role to be public and whether or not they will respond to letters or emails from residents outside their own ward. If it is important for the Heritage Champion to be involved you may wish to copy a message to your representative to the Heritage Champion. Exceptions to this may be if you want to invite your Heritage Champion to events. It may be possible to build relationships with the Heritage Champion to help inform his or her activities within the Council.

Government agencies

Historic England is the government agency with primary delegated responsibility for designation and scheduling of heritage assets. If your letter concerns getting a building listed, it is likely that Historic England will be the best contact. They have information on their website to help guide applications for the designation of heritage assets.

For issues relating to active planning applications which affect designated heritage assets, your local planning authority is the correct recipient. Due to shrinking staff resources and limitations of the organisation's statutory responsibility, Historic England can only offer limited advice for members of the public relating to specific cases. You may be better off contacting one of the [National Amenity Societies](#).



When to write

There is one main distinction in when people to write to representatives. This distinction is in whether a letter is 'proactive' or 'reactive'.

Reactive advocacy includes writing in response to an announcement, public consultation, news story, or proposal. Examples include:

- Proposals to cut the budget of an archaeology service, historic environment record, or local museum, or reorganise provision
- A local plan or supplementary planning guidance consultation
- Another policy which may affect heritage (or where reference to it is omitted)
- A general strategic plan or local authority priorities document

The majority of advocacy is reactive. However, it is inherently limited by the fact that it often occurs at an advanced stage in the decision making process. In the current climate, in many cases, once the consultation has been released the decision can already be a foregone conclusion.

As a general rule, the earlier you can write, the more options you have to gain influence.

Proactive letters can have significant impact. You may decide to do this because you perceive future threats (drawing on examples from neighbouring authorities or nationally), may wish to highlight particular local issues which are going unnoticed, to reinforce the current positive aspects of a system, or raise interest in better systems.

Proactive advocacy can still target topical or timely issues, for example the erosion of planning protections for archaeology (in the context of the Housing and Planning Bill).

More advice on general tips for advocacy can be found in [Toolkit 1: Advocacy : What can I do to protect my local historic environment?](#)



Example letters

The following letters are real letters which have been written by groups and individuals and been copied to the Local Heritage Network team. They are reproduced here with permission and appropriately anonymised.

Letter 1: Highlighting the democratic interest in heritage

Dear Cllr [Name],

The historic environment of [Town] is of enormous value to those who live here, work here, and visit here. This is attested by the [Community group], of which I am one of more than 10,000 members – many hundreds of which are in your Ward.

In 2014 we worked with the City Archaeologist and other members of the Council to gain permission to allow members of the public access to the Guildhall building for guided tours and photographic tours. Since that time we have shown over 3,000 people around the site and revealed its significance to those people. We have also, through various efforts, documented using photography, 3D scanning, and other techniques, 17 other historic buildings in the city under Council ownership, or subject to redevelopment or demolition. All our images are available to view online. In the case of buildings scheduled for demolition, our intervention provides a vestige of preservation for the heritage which they embodied which has now – often for good reason – been lost.

However, for every success, there has been a failure: We lost the Air Force Hutments behind the Art Gallery without proper recording and we were unable to access the 1930s former bus depot on Piccadilly, before they were each demolished. Furthermore, every time we try to initiate a project we face the same barriers; red tape, and lack of staff time to help facilitate. These issues are compounded by the annual salami-slice cuts to the Council's heritage specialists.

My question to you is: Does the Council appreciate the scale of the public interest in heritage? And what can be done to help enable us to add-value to Council services? I would welcome a conversation with you on this.

Letter 2: Supporting Lancashire's historic environment services

[Sender's address]

[Recipient's address]

23 February 2016

Dear Cllr. [Name],

My name is [name] and I am a committee member of the [town] Archaeological Society, a member of the Friends of [town] Museum, and a trustee of the XXXXXX Civic Society. My two children attended [town] Young Archaeologist's Club for many years, and we have each, in our adult years, taken part in community archaeology projects to explore our village history. As such, you may conclude, rightly, that I am concerned about heritage matters – but it is one particular concern that I am contacting you about, namely the consequences of the decision by Lancashire County Council to withdraw their service level agreement with the district authorities to deliver historic environment services on their behalf, including the provision of archaeological advice within the planning process, and the maintenance of the Historic Environment Record (HER), with effect from 1st April 2016.

LCC's claim that these services were 'non-statutory' was correct in so far as county is concerned – but I am sure you are aware the onus will now fall upon the districts, including Preston, to fulfil their legal obligations under the National Planning Policy Framework, including pre-application consultation, planning application screening, and recommendation of planning conditions. This is obviously going to be a whole lot more difficult – not to say expensive – without the county archaeological service. And you only have six weeks to come up with a solution!

I understand there have been some exploratory discussions between districts looking to share services, and I believe LCC has invited expressions of interest in an outside body (perhaps UCLan?) taking on the HER. I also know that the Council of British Archaeology (CBA) are looking at ways to support services in the north west. But in the last resort, the decision will fall to PCC as to how to provide these services going forward.

I can well understand that, with all the other financial pressures facing Preston, the last thing you wanted was LCC to add to those pressures by reneging on their agreement, and thus throwing the problem of complying with the NPPF back to the districts – but they have done it. With all the development coming in the next few years, especially as regards North West Preston, it is essential that PCC ensures that the planning process takes into account, as it is required to do, the impact of new development on sites of potential archaeological importance. At the appropriate time, I would be grateful to learn what you have decided, with regard to how PCC is to do this.

Regards,

Letter 3: Opposing cuts to Norfolk historic environment services

We are saddened by the intention of Norfolk County Council to make cuts to their exemplary Museums and Historic Environment Services. We are especially concerned by the proposal to withdraw funding from the excellent and invaluable finds identification and recording service. We understand that Norfolk County Council intend to withdraw all of the funding from this service and that its only funding will be from the Portable Antiquities Scheme, which would be equivalent to more than halving the service.

The effects of such a dramatic reduction will, naturally, be directly detrimental to the care, preservation and understanding of Norfolk's indisputably rich heritage, with over 15000 historic items recorded every year. But more than this the scheme has given birth to a huge network of socially responsible volunteers who have a respect and knowledge for their local heritage that would never have developed without the dedicated and knowledgeable professionals that Norfolk County Council employs.

The value of socially responsible community engagement that this scheme has helped to foster can't be overstated. There are a multitude of benefits including better physical and mental health for people engaged as volunteers or by chance in the collection and study of their heritage; a sense of social cohesion and belonging, and of course the local economy benefits enormously when people are healthy and engaged in their communities. Without the support of professionals to encourage and nurture engagement in Norfolk's heritage, all of this will be eroded and Norfolk will be a poorer place to live.

Norfolk County Council was forward thinking when the scheme was first set up by them in the late 1970s and the scheme was used as a model for the nationwide Portable Antiquities Scheme. Such a dramatic reduction now would be a backwards step. Please reconsider.

Yours Sincerely,



Sources

<http://www.cpj.ca/writing-letter-your-mp>

<https://www.writetothem.com/about-yourep>