



ncoss  
NSW Council of Social Service

# Advocacy Toolkit

A GUIDE TO INFLUENCING DECISION-MAKING TO END  
POVERTY AND DISADVANTAGE IN NSW

# Advocacy 1.0



Advocacy plays a crucial role in influencing and changing policy systems. It is the process of helping decision makers understand what the real issues are and directing them towards the solutions.

The community service sector lives at the heart of our society, and holds insights into what our communities need to thrive. NCOSS works hard to be the conduit of information between the community service sector and government. However, we also seek to empower and support our members to speak for themselves, their clients and communities.

This Advocacy Toolkit provides an overview of the tools and strategies used by NCOSS to achieve positive change for people who are experiencing poverty and disadvantage. The strategies covered in this Advocacy Toolkit are by no means exhaustive.

Your feedback is important to us. If you want to learn more about a particular advocacy strategy or provide feedback, please contact the Policy and Advocacy team at [advocacy@ncoss.org.au](mailto:advocacy@ncoss.org.au).

# Strategic Advocacy

Busy and passionate workplaces can often charge into advocacy work, reacting to current events and circumstances. While it's important to seize an opportunity for reform when it arises, it is just as important to pause and think about your advocacy strategy. With a strategic advocacy plan, we can focus our time and resources more effectively.

Start by asking yourself and your colleagues the following questions:

## What is the problem?

Having a clear articulated problem statement is an essential first step to advocating for policy reform. Here is an example from NCOSS's submission in response to the **Social Services Legislation Amendment (Strengthening Income Support) Bill 2021**.

**Example problem:** *1.2 million Australians who will be living in poverty once the [Coronavirus] supplement is withdrawn will include households that were previously comfortable.*

## What change is needed to address the problem?

Decision makers want solutions-focused policy recommendations. Be clear about the changes you want to see.

**Example solution:** *Set a minimum income floor across the working-age payments system set at the current pension rate which is currently \$472 per week (including the Pension Supplement).*

## Is our problem statement and proposed solution supported by evidence?

Analyse the evidence. Do you have enough evidence to support the claim? What more do you need to find out? Are there barriers to obtaining the evidence?

Use existing data or source new data to illustrate the impact of your issue. Evidence is more than facts and figures, and many decision makers want to hear how the issue is directly impacting the lived experience of community members.

More information on using data and working with people with lived experience is provided in the chapter **Building the Evidence and Lived Experience and Ethical Considerations**.

# Strategic Advocacy

## Is our argument persuasive?

Decision makers want to hear a persuasive argument that is supported by strong evidence. How you package this information is important. Rarely will decision makers have time to read lengthy and well-researched reports before they meet you. Work on developing succinct messaging. More information on how to prepare for meetings with MPs is provided in the chapter [Influencing Government Decision-Making](#).

## Who has the power and influence to bring about the change we want to see?

It is important to understand early on who has the decision-making power to address your issue. More information on this is provided in the chapter [Influencing Government Decision-Making](#).

Take the time to reach out to networks in your community and across the sector to see what alliances are already working on your issue. Let NCOSS know about your advocacy work; there may be opportunities to work together or ways that we can support your advocacy efforts.

Finally, map out other stakeholders' interest, power and influence. Understanding who your allies and opponents are, as well as their reach and influence, will make your advocacy efforts targeted and strategic.

## How do we get an audience with a decision maker?

Getting your message out in the public domain, or on the desk of a decision maker, requires strategic thinking and identification of entry points. This Toolkit provides information on how to meet with decision makers, as well as how to use the media to grow public awareness and support for your issue. (See the chapter [Media](#)).



# Building the Evidence

Building the evidence is essential to developing good policy. If your organisation's core business is not policy and research, building your evidence can at times be overwhelming.

## Where to start?

There is no substitute for secondary research, and the community service sector has built an excellent library of primary research. The challenge is where to start looking.

If you are interested in a particular issue or problem, chances are that others are interested too, and some research is likely to be readily available in the field. Here are some steps you can take to find the data and research that you need to build your evidence base:

- Engage your networks to see if other organisations are doing advocacy or research on the issue. Call your peak body or other policy-focused organisations; they will likely know people that they can put you in contact with.

- Search online for universities and academics that have written about the issue, or a related issue, then contact them. You will find that most academics are very willing to point you in the right direction or even partner with you if the research does not already exist.
- Look at the work of research-focused organisations, such as the [Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development](#), the [Productivity Commission](#), [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#), [AHURI](#) or the [Reserve Bank of Australia](#).
- Use data from government reports where possible, it is difficult for government to ignore its own research.

## Data resources

There is a lot of open-source data available. Here is a list of the top data resources that NCOSS uses.

### [NCOSS and NATSEM Disadvantage Map](#)

### [NCOSS and NATSEM NSW Fire Impacted Communities](#)

### [National Maps](#)

### [Federal Government open source data](#)

### [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#)

(ABS staff are usually willing to point you in the direction of what is available so always ask)

## Document and data management

Managing your evidence promotes efficiency and ensures that all your hard work is not lost between projects and staff turnover. Use a referencing database or software to manage your data and research. Free database software is available online:

### [Zotero](#)

### [Mendeley](#)

# Influencing Government Decision-Making

This chapter discusses how to influence government decision-making through direct appeals to politicians.

If a politician stands behind your issue, they can help bring your issue into the spotlight by attending your events, putting questions to the relevant Minister during question time, or using their parliamentary vote to support your issue.

## Who should you speak to?

Who you speak to will largely depend on the nature of the issue you are raising and the level of government that has jurisdiction to address it.

As a first step, identify if your issue is the responsibility of local, state or federal government. Note: it may involve more than one level of government.

Once you have identified the level of government that has responsibility for your matter, you need to identify the best person to raise your issue with. This might be your local Member of Parliament (MP), a Minister or Shadow Minister, a ministerial adviser or a parliamentary committee.

## Ministerial Advisors

Advisors support Ministers by preparing briefs on bills that are going before Parliament, conducting research into policy solutions and playing a role in developing legislation. Advisors spend significant amount of time with Ministers and are often a trusted source of information that the Minister relies on. Securing a meeting with an advisor and convincing them of your issue can influence parliamentary decision-making.

## Parliamentary Committees

Parliamentary Committees undertake inquiries and are a great opportunity to put your issue on the record. A list of current NSW inquiries can be found on the [Parliament of NSW website](#). NCOSS offers a free workshop which is delivered with the Legislative Council Parliamentary Committees staff on how to successfully participate in the committee process, from submission writing to appearing at a hearing. See our [Training and Events webpage](#).

## Your Local Member of Parliament

Making contact with your local MP is a good first step because they have a commitment to represent the needs of their community.

# Influencing Government Decision-Making



Even if your local MP is not a key decision maker in government, they can be an excellent advocate for your issue by:

- Raising your issue during debates on government business
- Putting forward their views on the government's agenda
- Initiating legislation and motions for debate (Private Members bills)

## Ministers and Shadow Ministers

Ministers are key decision makers and can strongly influence legislative and policy reform. Ministers have responsibilities broader than representing their own electorate and have very busy schedules. If you are successful in securing a meeting with a Minister, preparation is key.

## Finding your representative

**Local Government Directory**

**NSW Members of Parliament**

**NSW Members of Legislative Council**

**Federal Member of Parliament**

**Federal NSW Senators**

## Call a Member of Parliament

If you are time-poor, phoning your MP can be an effective method in bringing your issue to the attention of your political representative. The likelihood of reaching your MP for a chat varies, and is dependent on their workload and personal approach to engaging with constituents.

Always start by letting the MP or staff member know that you are a voter in their electorate. Keep your conversation limited to one issue. If you are talking to a staffer, request that the MP respond to you in writing with their position.

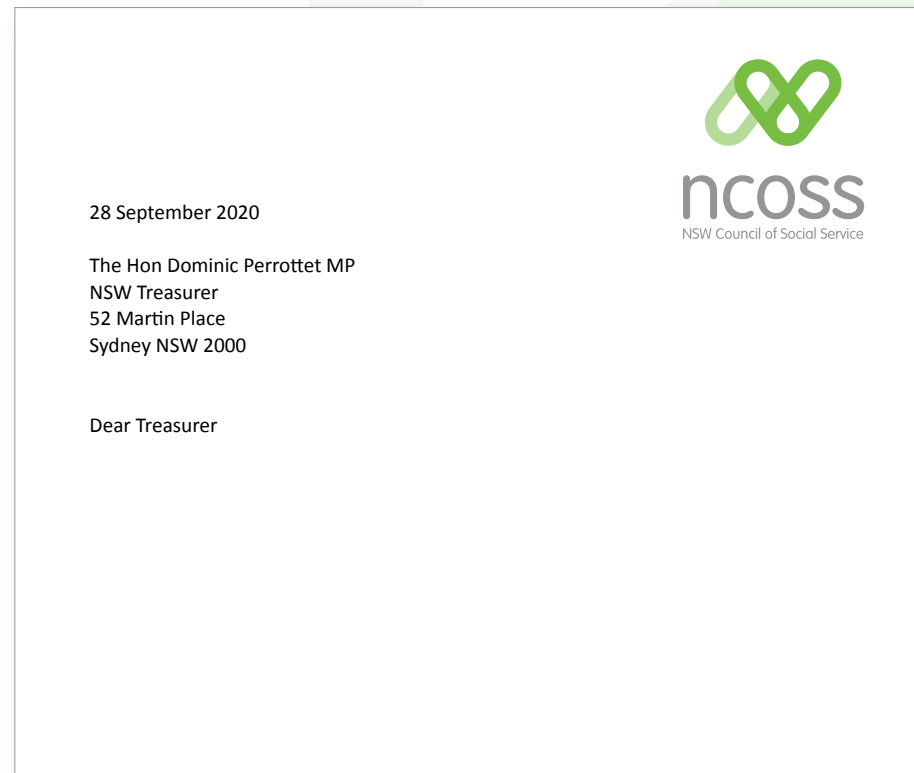


# Influencing Government Decision-Making

## Write to a MP or Minister

If you wish to meet with a politician, it is best to write and request a meeting, outlining succinctly the issue you would like to talk about. Make sure you include the following:

- If you are writing to your MP, let them know that you are a constituent.
- Focus on no more than 2-3 points.
- Ensure your data and research is accurate and referenced correctly. Attach a copy of a relevant report that supports your points.
- Include a call to action, i.e: what do you want them to do?
- Don't forget to ask for a reply and to include your return mailing address!
- Include correct salutation and address in the top left hand corner as illustrated:





# Influencing Government Decision-Making

## Meeting with a MP or Minister

If you are meeting with your local MP, it is best to meet them in their electorate. If it is possible and appropriate, invite your MP to meet with you at your workplace. In-person visits can help build understanding and better relationships.

If you want to meet with a Minister or MP who is not in your electorate, you should meet them during **Parliamentary sitting weeks**.

Remember that sitting weeks are very busy and there is a good chance that your scheduled meeting will be interrupted by business in the Chamber.

## Prepare, prepare!

Once you have secured a meeting with your MP or Minister, it is time to prepare!

- Before you meet with an MP or Minister, you should do some background research to see where they are likely to position themselves on your issue. MPs use their first speech to highlight issues they care about. **Hansard** is also a valuable resource because it is a written record of proceedings and debates in parliament.
- It can be good for your courage to take someone with you, but try to limit your party to three. Taking a person with lived experience can be powerful. Supporting lived-experience advocates is discussed in the chapter **Lived Experience and Ethical Considerations**.
- Prepare a 1-2 page brief with your key points and supporting evidence that you can leave with them. Ensure that you include your contact details.
- Etiquette is important. Never be rude or raise your voice in disagreement, always be polite.

## Writing submissions

Writing a submission to an Inquiry is an excellent way to get your issue on the record. There are no rules about how long your submission needs to be; it can be as short or long as you like. However, for your submission to be effective, there are a number of factors to consider:

- Your submission should be clear and concise. The Parliamentary Committee staff have to read many submissions and if your submission is not concise, then essential points may be missed.
- Advocacy is about convincing decision makers that the issue you are advocating for exists, and that it matters. See chapter in **Building the Evidence** for more information on how to build your evidence base.
- Make sure your submission includes clear recommendations. Place them up the top of your submission.
- Ensure you reference evidence in your submission. If it is an online resource, include the link so the Committee staff can easily navigate to your supporting research.

# Media

Getting your issue in the public spotlight can help build community awareness. When an issue gains traction within the broader community, it becomes easier to garner support from parliamentarians.

## Media releases

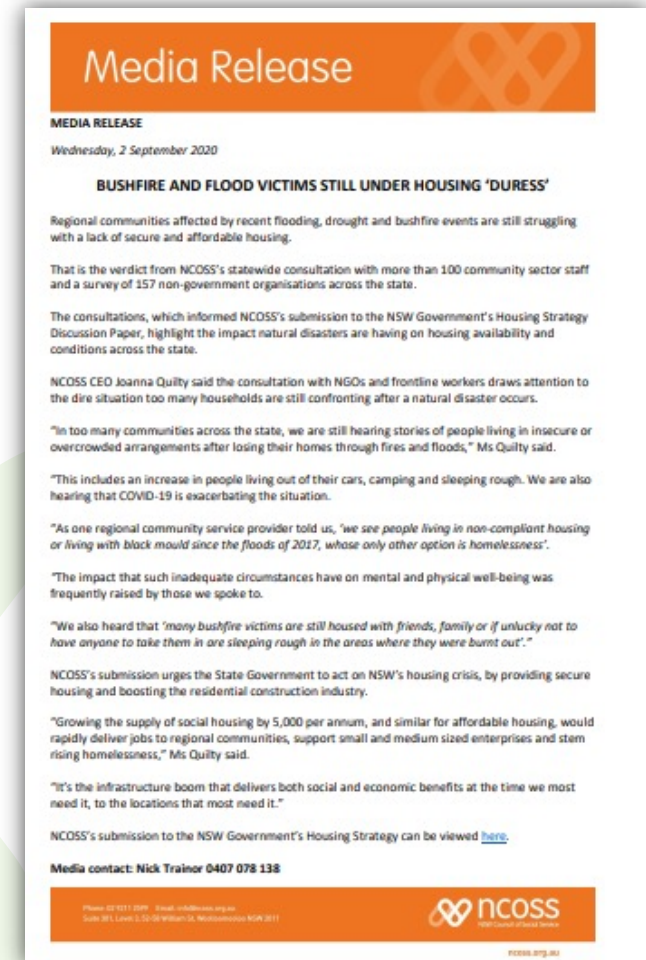
It can be difficult to get traction in mainstream media. If you want your story to be picked up by the media, the best way to do this is to write a media release.

Writing a media release can be counter-intuitive for many people, as we have learnt from school that a story has a beginning, a middle and an end. What we can relate to is being busy, and that is the key to writing a media release: short, snappy and with the most important information up the top.

- Capture attention with a clever and punchy headline.
- Your most important point should be included in the first paragraph.
- Use quotes to make it feel personal and human.
- Keep it short. No longer than one page.
- Include contact details.

## Case studies

When you send out your media release, it can be useful to have on hand case studies, or people with lived experience who are willing to talk to the media. Frequently, mainstream media will only run a story if they can interview someone with lived experience. See the chapter on **Lived Experience and Ethical Considerations** regarding working with third parties.



# Media

## Social media

Social media is free, instant and has the potential to get your message out to a large audience. If used well, social media can be a powerful advocacy tool.

There are many social media platforms; however, the most frequently used are Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram. Before you open up a page on a platform, consider: what you want to achieve, what your target audience is and how much time and resources you can invest to manage and maintain the page. It's better to have no page than a 'dead' page.

### There are many reasons why an NGO should be on social media:

- **Exposure** – Being on social media has the potential to expose your organisation / advocacy work / campaigns to hundreds of thousands more people who otherwise would not have seen or known about you.
- **Share your work** – Social media is a great way to share your work and advocacy efforts with your supporters and donors.

- **Join in discussions** – Most platforms use hashtags which allow you to stay on top of trending issues and debates in the sector. It allows you to come into conversations and debate where appropriate. It also shows supporters, government and stakeholders that you are up to date and are an expert in your field.
- **Great tools for fundraising, polls and feedback** – Various platforms have different tools. If utilised correctly, it's an opportunity to receive direct feedback or fundraise through your pages.

### Maximising your social media presence

- **Frequency** – Spread your posts throughout the day. Do not send multiple posts in succession as it looks like you're flooding the page/account. Instead, leave a minimum gap of 30 minutes between posts.
- **Humor** – while it is important to keep things light and to vary the mix, be careful about sharing or making jokes. What you find funny, others may find offensive.

- **Inclusive** – share or engage in other organisations' posts. Remember, it's a conversation. Look for ways to share great information.
- **Personal** – social media users tend to avoid the automation of posts; for example, generating content from RSS feeds and regurgitation of press releases. Followers tend to prefer a blend of posts, replies and sharing of other posts. Social media is a two-way street. The more you interact, the more you'll be followed.
- **Tone** – The tone of voice to be used online for your organisation is a personal choice. NCOSS aims to be credible, consistent and engaging whilst being aware of the target audience of each account. Try not to use industry speak, clichés and buzzwords.

# Media



## Over the years, organic reach on social media platforms has dropped.

Organic posts on social media ('organic' meaning unpaid posts) are important because they showcase your organisation, voice and key messaging and allows for engagement with your followers. However, recent data shows that Facebook's average organic reach has dropped to an average of between 1 to 2.2% per post, with higher performing brands at 5% per post.

That's why it's important to consider putting in place a social media strategy that includes sponsored ads and boosting posts alongside organic posts. This is an affordable, low investment approach that can maximise your reach to new audiences. You should always set a goal and monitor the performance of paid campaigns as well as review what is and isn't working.

## Looking at additional ways of being found online?

Google offers [Google Ad Grants for NFPs](#) with up to \$10,000 per month of in-kind advertising spend. Advertising on Google Search engines, websites and mobile apps can increase the visibility of your organisation and services, as well as your chances of being found.

## Legal considerations

Being aware of legal issues and strategies to reduce risk are important for your organisation's reputation, especially with the speed at which information can travel on the internet. For more information and additional resources, go to: [nfplaw.org.au/socialmedia](https://nfplaw.org.au/socialmedia).

## Management Tools

There are also platforms that assist with the ongoing management of your social media channels, with options for free and paid subscriptions:

Have a look at platforms such as:

- **Hootsuite:** A platform that integrates your social media accounts including Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, YouTube and Pinterest. It enables you to create and schedule posts, plan campaigns, respond to messages and analyse your results.
- **Bitly:** A link management platform that allows you to shorten, share, manage and analyse links to your content.

# Lived Experience and Ethical Considerations

Stats and facts can establish that there is an issue, but it is only through personal and human stories that the problem can be felt and the impact understood.

Working with people with lived experience is an important aspect of advocating for people who are experiencing vulnerability and disadvantaged.

When working with people with lived experience, policy and advocacy professionals have an ethical and professional responsibility to obtain informed consent. It is essential that the entire advocacy engagement process does not cause or renew trauma for the individual. NCOSS employs the following principles when working with people with lived experience, to ensure their wellbeing throughout the process.

## Principle 1

### Empowerment – elevate the role and amplify the voice

Provide training and support to elevate the voice of people with lived experience and build their knowledge for self-advocacy.

## Principle 2

### Co-production – involve early and throughout at all levels

Value the perspectives of people with lived experience by ensuring a seat at the table. Engage them early in the process, ideally at the stage of inception.

## Principle 3

### Respect – value expertise and provide support

Respect individual experience and intellectual property of people with lived experience through: co-design, providing remuneration, support and development, and being accountable through record-keeping procedures.

## Principle 4

### Diversity – be accessible and represent equitably

Lived experience advocates are a diverse group; it is important to create partnership opportunities that are accessible and inclusive. Context can be experienced differently by different people and disadvantage can be intersectional.

## Principle 5

### Self-determination and autonomy – confront oppression

Stigmatisation and paternalistic policy have a negative impact on people with lived experience. Be aware of the power dynamics that exists in lived experience partnerships. Do not reproduce existing power dynamics by dominating partnerships. It is always the choice of lived experience advocates to partner with an organisation, to shape the partnership, and to exit the partnership at any time.

# Lived Experience and Ethical Considerations

## Principle 6

### Dignity – challenge stigma and be strengths-based

Represent lived experience advocates in a dignified manner and advocate for dignified representation of lived experience. Challenge stigma around lived experience and advocate to shift the narrative. This is particularly important when referring, linking and supporting lived experience advocates to third parties like the media.

## Principle 7

### Partnership and accountability – build authentic relationships

Engage with lived experience advocates as genuine partners. Partnerships are built on openness, respect, and empathy. Partnership activities are purposeful, accountable and transparent. Identify and explain the purpose and process of partnership activity, including the likelihood to influence outcomes.

## Media and other Third Parties

When an organisation refers media or a third party to a lived experience advocate, the organisation should encourage them to be linked in with and supported by a representative of an advocacy group of their choice.

You can support lived experience advocates in the following ways:

**Prepare.** Lived experience advocates who engage with media need to be properly briefed and prepared. Advocates and advocacy groups should have access to media training and comprehensive advice about potential harmful outcomes of media exposure. This is best done prior to media engagement.

**Support.** Support lived experience advocates working with the media by emphasising the importance of self-care, doing post activity check-ins and providing access to counselling support (e.g. Employee Assistance Program), regardless of whether an advocate uses the services or not.

**Media plan.** Agree on a media plan prior to media activity with advocates (and third parties, where appropriate), to identify clear goals for each party. These include their media preferences (e.g. radio, print, TV), media strengths (previous experience, training, or confidence / passion on specific issues), key messages, potential risks or unintended consequence, and the level of identification or anonymity.

**Manage risks.** Engaging with media to tell a story in the public forum involves risks and potential consequences. The public can now engage in news stories through news comment feeds and social media. It is important that your organisation has a risk management tools to identify specific risks for lived experience advocates when they engage with the media.

**Confront stigma.** Uphold the dignity of people with lived experience by actively challenging stigma in the media wherever you see it.



NCOSS – NSW Council of Social Service

Suite 301, Level 3, 52-58 William St, Woolloomooloo NSW 2011

T: 02 9211 2599

E: [info@ncoss.org.au](mailto:info@ncoss.org.au)

[ncoss.org.au](http://ncoss.org.au)

