

How to:



**Friends of
the Earth**

get your letter in the paper

You've got a lot of points to make and you want to be sure people know about them. **Anna Mitchell, Press Officer, puts pen to paper to bring you some tips on getting your message across in a letter to the local media**

Keep it local

The regional and local media is read and watched by huge numbers of people, many of whom never pick up a national newspaper or tune into the national news.

You can also be sure that your MP follows what is happening in the regional press very closely.

Local media is without doubt a key way of getting your message across to the public and of convincing your MP that your views are shared by voters across the constituency.

“My local newspapers are vital for me to find out about the issues that local people are concerned about, and also to let them know what I am up to. When an issue is raised in local papers - whether as a news story or a debate on the letters page - it has a real influence on my work.”

Don Foster, MP for Bath and Liberal Democrat Shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

“When I worked for an MP, scrutinising the local paper was crucial. If a campaign was doing well in the local paper, we knew we had to sit up and take notice. And my MP knew that he needed to get regular positive coverage in the paper as well - we had an unofficial target of three stories a week. There was no doubt the local paper mattered far more than national newspapers, where most backbenchers are only ever mentioned a few times a year.”

Martyn Williams, Parliamentary Co-ordinator, Friends of the Earth

Letters to the editor

Letters are an excellent way of getting an issue into the local paper. Letters pages are often one of the most widely read parts of the paper and can spark debate and generate wider coverage of an issue. To keep an issue bubbling, why not get one group member to write a letter and then the next week get another to write in response, supporting them and adding further points. You could keep this up for several weeks.

You can use the letters pages for a variety of purposes:

- to recruit new group members;
- to publicise a group event or activity;
- to voice your opinion on something happening at a national or local level;
- to raise an issue you think has been overlooked;
- to highlight the fact your MP hasn't backed The Big Ask yet ... or
- to highlight the fact that she or he has.

Top tips

You don't need to be an expert to write to your paper on an environmental issue – you just need to have an opinion. To help you get started, here are ten top tips

1

Keep your letter short and to the point – no more than three paragraphs.

2

Include your name and address – you can ask a newspaper not to print your details, but if you don't supply them your letter won't get in.

3

Your letter can be typed or hand-written, delivered, faxed or e-mailed.

4

You can either initiate a topic or react to a letter or article that has already been printed. If it's the latter, quote the letter writer and the date.

5

Personalise your letter with your thoughts or anecdotes as well as giving the campaign messages and statistics.

6

Make local links. Though general letters do get in, you are more likely to get your letter printed if you make an issue such as climate change relevant to the readers. For example, link your letter to what your MP has or hasn't done or to a local debate or group activity.

7

Avoid jargon – if you can't avoid using a technical word or phrase, make sure you explain what you mean.

8

Don't assume your audience knows the issues – keep it simple.

9

Style matters – the way you word your letter could be the difference between winning over hearts and minds and getting people's backs up. Avoid self-righteous language – no one wants to be preached at; and avoid exaggeration – people will dismiss your arguments if you sound hysterical.

10

It is always worth following up with a phone call to ensure the paper has received your letter.

Copy cats

Why not follow the examples of local groups which make writing to the Editor a habit?

Hammersmith and Fulham Friends of the Earth dedicate a page of their website to giving full contact details of all their local newspapers. Giving people a helping hand like this is much more likely to result in a letter actually being sent, rather than just being written in a moment of indignation and left on the mantelpiece because the writer didn't have time to look up the address.

Birmingham Friends of the Earth check the local newspapers regularly, and try to get a letter off in response to something about once a week. "They're a good way of informing people of upcoming events as well as presenting an alternative point of view on a local issue," says Birmingham's Alison Breadon. "Something we've done in the past is to write several letters, one officially from the group and others from different group members as individuals. This creates the impression that the issue is "live" and it's not just the greenies that care about it. More than once we've hogged the entire letters' page."

Here are some examples of letters that made it into the papers.

The Observer, 8 May 2005
(the weekend after the general election)

Is more air travel inevitable?

It's good to see that "Rising number of greens ditch cheap air travel" (News, last week). I'm not surprised – when people understand the real urgency of climate change they will act appropriately. So why have past governments assumed that the desire for more air travel is intractable – could it be that they secretly think of ordinary folks as stupid and selfish?

Martin Parkinson
London

Martin is a Friends of the Earth supporter and sometimes volunteers at Underwood Street.

Whitley Bay News Guardian
(readership 78,000)

Our campaign to get people to sign Big Ask cards

Newcastle Gateshead Friends of the Earth and North Tyneside Friends of the Earth are running a joint stall at Tynemouth market to coincide with the Farmers' Day at the station on June 17, 2006.

This is also national Friends of the Earth's Day of Action on climate change where the aim is to get as many people as possible to sign The Big Ask cards and help put pressure on their MPs to support the bill on climate change through Parliament.

The Big Ask cards were signed at Newcastle's Green Festival at Leazes Park on Saturday, June 3 and Sunday, June 4. This action will be continued at Grey's Monument in Newcastle to mark World Environment Day on Monday, June 18, 11am to 5pm.

Thanks for the support already shown but we need to emphasise the importance of signing the Big Ask cards at Tynemouth Station on June 17.

STEPHEN J WEDDERBURN
Haswell Gardens
North Shields

How to...Pull-out section

The write stuff

Love writing?

Then join Friends of the Earth e-group and have your say

1 The Big Ask Big Month Big Lobby is an ideal excuse for you to get your name in print. Why not write to your local paper during the month to express your delight that your local MP has backed the Big Ask... or your disappointment that he or she has yet to support a climate change law.

2 Every day newspapers and websites implore readers to have their say on the big issues of the day – from the letters pages of your local paper, to the *Times* debate pages and the *Have your say* section of BBC online. Getting your voice into these debates is a great way to engage the public and get your point across to decision-makers who, you can be sure, read the comments closely.

That's why Friends of the Earth is setting up an email group for people who would like to have their say and help support Friends of the Earth's campaigning work at the same time. If you join the email group you will receive an email every so often with ideas on issues to write to your local paper about, the occasional request to respond to articles in the national press and details of environmental debates raging on the nations' websites that you can join. We will provide all the information you need to help you make your point.

If you would like to get involved or would like more information, please email letters@foe.co.uk



Resources

How to use the media: **Change Your World's** pull-out guide is available from http://community.foe.co.uk/resource/how_tos/cyw_36_use_the_media.pdf

The Media Trust Online Guides

Lots of helpful hints and tips on how to get the most out of the media. Look under Our Services – Online Guides at <http://www.mediatrust.org/>

Tips for media coverage for The Big Ask in the *Action guide*, pp 7–8 http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/action_guides/big_ask_actionpack_one.pdf

Come to the media workshop at **Local Groups Conference**. If you haven't registered yet for this three-day event, please see p 15 or go to <http://community.foe.co.uk/conference>