

We Have Power:

a Guide to Engaging
with Your MLA and
Using Your Voice for Change



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Introduction

Welcome to *We Have Power: a Guide to Engaging with Your MLA and Using Your Voice for Change*.

We Have Power was created in partnership between the **Nova Scotia College of Social Workers** and the **Legal Information Society of Nova Scotia**.

We created this resource to help empower members of the public to engage in local politics and understand the important role we all play in advocating for a Nova Scotia that serves everyone's needs.

We **all** have the power to shape our shared future.

As you read through this guide, you'll read some tips and strategies for engaging with local politicians and ensuring they understand what is important to you and your community.

We've included tips on effective communication, information about what your MLA's role is and how you can contact them, and templates for making calls and writing letters about the issues that matter to you.

We encourage you to take the tools that we have offered and tailor them to your own concerns, voice, and experience. Together we can use our voices to build a province where people don't just live but can authentically thrive.



Freedom can never be taken for granted. Each generation must safeguard it and extend it. Your parents and elders sacrificed much so that you should have freedom without suffering what they did. Use this precious right to ensure that the darkness of the past never returns.

Nelson Mandela

Why it matters to engage in local politics

Our political system and government work best when everyone has a voice.

We live in a democracy, which is by its nature a form of government designed to represent the concerns and interests of the entire population.

We each play an important role in our democracy when we vote to elect our leaders.

Voting is one of the most essential and effective ways of ensuring that we have leaders who reflect our values and understand our concerns. When we vote, we use our voices and our individual power to influence social change and progress.

We vote so that we can elect leaders who can represent us and speak for us in places where important decisions are made.

Our elected representatives have the ability to shape policy decisions, decide what is given priority within our provincial budget, make revisions to our laws, and create new laws.

Sometimes we think that our ability to shape our government and its direction ends after we've voted. But this is not true.

We each have the power to influence the direction taken and decisions made by our leaders well beyond election day. After an election, we can continue to play an important role in our democratic process by engaging with our leaders and letting them know what matters to everyday Nova Scotians and our communities.

We know that there are many important issues these days that are of crucial concern to Nova Scotians.

You may be concerned about the rising cost of living, access to healthcare and mental health resources, housing and food insecurity, or the many other issues that impact us and the people we care about.



Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead

Many people feel like they have little or no power on an individual level to create meaningful social change. But this is not true. You do have power. **When we let our leaders know what matters to us, we can shape our province's present and its future.**

It is a privilege to live in a democracy and to have the power to shape our government and influence its direction. But in order for a democracy to work effectively, we all need to participate.

If community members give up on political engagement, democracy can't meaningfully thrive and our government won't truly represent who we are as a society and what values we hold.

So remember that **you do have power.**

Many of the most important policy and legislative changes that have happened in our province have been the result of individual people raising their voices and letting those in power know that change is needed.

Individual citizens have always played an important role in identifying concerns and issues that are important to them and to their communities. Nova Scotia is at its best when people from all different communities, backgrounds, and identities speak up about what matters to them.

When individual citizens voice their concerns, this gives our government the opportunity to understand what is impacting people across our province and respond through concrete action.



The importance of the ordinary citizen is very greatly underestimated – not so much by those in authority as by the ordinary citizen himself.

Jan Struther

What MLAs do – Your MLA works for you!

In Nova Scotia, Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) are people who have been elected to the Nova Scotia House of Assembly.

MLAs are responsible for:

- ▶ Researching and proposing new laws
- ▶ Representing the needs and concerns of their communities
- ▶ Debating proposed laws with other MLAs when the House is in session
- ▶ Passing new laws that serve the interests of our province and its communities.

Did you know?



Nova Scotia has 55 electoral districts. This means that there are 55 communities across our province that are responsible for electing an MLA who will represent their interests and concerns. If you're not certain which MLA represents your community, you can find this information [here](#).

MLAs are responsible for shaping the present and the future of our province by making updates to our province's laws and passing new laws. An MLA's role is to represent the community that elected them and collaborate with other MLAs to govern the province and address the needs and concerns that arise.



Those who love peace must learn to organize as well as those who love war.

Dr. Martin Luther King

When the House of Assembly is “sitting” or “in session,” this means that MLAs from across the province are meeting to discuss and debate proposed laws. This happens at Province House in downtown Halifax.

There is no set schedule for when the House is in legislative session, but the *House of Assembly Act* requires that the House sits at least twice every year, in the spring and in the fall.

When the House is not in session, MLAs usually return to their communities to learn about the issues and concerns that their residents (also called “constituents”) may have. MLAs are sometimes able to lobby for citizens on individual concerns, but their primary role is to identify and represent the broad needs of Nova Scotians and create new laws that help our province function and thrive. This is where you come in!

Most MLAs are members of a political party, for example the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party, the New Democratic Party (NDP), or the Green Party. Some MLAs may also get elected as Independents, which means that they are not part of any political party and do not align with a particular party’s political platform.

MLAs representing different parties will compete with each other to get elected and form a part of the government. The party with the support of the majority of MLAs will become the government, and the remaining MLAs form what is known as the opposition.



Change in a democracy can be brought about quickly or slowly. The speed depends on its people’s honesty of mind, their values, their humility and knowledge and insight; and, above all else, on the will to act, once they realize the need for action.

Lilian Smith

As members of political parties, MLAs not only represent individual citizens’ concerns but also represent the interests of the party that they are a part of. Each political party has a specific platform which reflects the values, concerns, and priorities of their members.

We often think of parties as either progressive (left-wing) or conservative (right-wing), or sometimes somewhere in between these two poles.

In a general sense, an MLA will usually try to get laws passed that align well with their party’s interests. Sometimes the parties have very different points of view, but depending on the issue, there is sometimes overlap between parties’ priorities.

A very important point that we want to make is that **you have a right to speak to your MLA and raise your concerns no matter what political party you belong to or what party you have voted for in the past.** For example, if you are an NDP supporter and there is a Conservative MLA elected to represent your community, you can and should still approach that MLA with your concerns.

It is your right as a citizen to share your thoughts, ideas, and concerns with your MLA. This may include ideas about new laws that should be passed, old laws that should be updated, policy changes that impact your community, or any other important issue that you wish to share that is relevant to how our province functions and its future.

Did you know?



Your MLA may be a part of a particular political party, but they are also there to serve all of Nova Scotia and in particular the community members that they have been elected to represent.

As we said in the introduction, our government works best when individual Nova Scotians feel heard and feel meaningfully represented. In a democracy, every person matters and every voice matters.



Democracy in the contemporary world demands, among other things, an educated and informed people.

Elizabeth Bishop

How a Bill becomes a law

In the section above, we covered the roles and responsibilities of our MLAs. Next, we'll talk about how a Bill becomes a law.

What is a Bill? A law begins as an idea. The next step is to propose this idea in writing. A Bill is simply a proposal to create a new law or to change or repeal a current law. A Bill becomes a formal part of our law when it passes through all the stages required as part of the legislative process. When a Bill becomes a law, it is then known as an Act.

As we've discussed, MLAs are responsible for creating new laws and making changes to current laws. This is not the only role of our MLAs, but it is one of the most important ones.

Our laws reflect many of our most important and core values as human beings. We all have individual values that are essential to us and that are the foundation of our unique moral codes. You can think of the law as the moral code that we have established together as a society.

The law reflects our society's values – for example, who we grant protections to and what these protections involve.

Our values as a society evolve. This is very clear when you think back to what our society looked like 50 years ago or 100 years ago. As society evolves, our laws must evolve as well – and they do! This is why it is so important to tell our lawmakers (our MLAs) what it is that we value and how we want to see this reflected in the laws that we all share.

Our MLAs play an important part in:

- ▶ creating and introducing new Bills,
- ▶ debating the ideas and content that make up these Bills, and
- ▶ voting on whether these Bills will become formal law.

All of the MLAs in the House of Assembly have an opportunity to provide input on a Bill.

One of the most important ways that this happens is through **debate**. Debate is an important part of the political process. It allows everyone involved to hear and understand different points of view and priorities.

When MLAs debate a Bill, they might bring up any of the following:

- points that are based on research that they have done,
- concerns and priorities shared by their political party as a whole, and
- input they receive from their communities and individual citizens.

What this means is that **everyone in Nova Scotia has the power to influence what becomes a law in our province.**

You have the power to influence change and impact what becomes law. There are two main ways you can do this:

1. One of these ways is by **telling your MLA about what matters to you.** You can do this by email, by writing a letter, by making a phone call, or setting up an appointment to speak with someone at your MLA's office to share your concerns. Your MLA can then voice these concerns when potential Bills are being considered or debated.
2. Another way that you can use your voice to influence our law is by **sharing your input on a Bill directly with the Committee** that is responsible for making recommendations about a Bill. You can do this in person or in writing. We'll talk more about how this process works below.

What is the role of the Speaker of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly?

The Speaker of the House of Assembly is an important figure in the process of how a bill becomes a law. The Speaker is an MLA who is chosen by the other MLAs to oversee and direct the debate process.

When the House is in session, the Speaker's job is to:

- maintain order and oversee the debate as it's happening,
- make important decisions based on the formal rules of the House of Assembly, and
- make sure that all viewpoints are heard and that the debate process remains fair and respectful.

The Speaker doesn't take part in the debate itself. But if a vote in the House of Assembly ends up in a tie, then the Speaker casts the deciding vote.

For information about the current Speaker of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly, visit [here](#).

What are the stages that a Bill goes through?

A Bill goes through various steps before it gets passed and becomes a law. Some Bills don't end up getting passed, which means they never become part of our law.

MLAs get to vote on Bills at different stages, so play an essential role in whether a Bill makes it to the next stage.

There is a series of stages that a Bill must pass through in order to become a law.

The first stage is that **the Bill is introduced by an MLA**. The MLA does this by rising from their seat and making a formal request of the Speaker for permission to introduce the Bill. The Bill is then assigned a number and printed so that all of the MLAs get a copy. The Bill isn't read or debated at this stage.

The next stage is known as the **second reading**. At the second reading stage, the MLA who introduced the Bill explains the purpose of the Bill and its content.

During the second reading, all MLAs have the opportunity to debate the content and purpose of the Bill.

Each MLA is only allowed to speak once during this debate. No changes are made to the Bill at this time, but points raised during the debate may influence what changes are made at the next stage in the Bill's life.

If a Bill passes second reading, this means it has received enough support from the MLAs. It is then **referred to a Committee** that is responsible for reviewing each part of the Bill and making recommendations for any changes that are needed.

Can members of the public provide input on Bills before the House of Assembly?

Yes, they can! You have a right to share your voice and be heard. Public input is an essential part of the democratic process.

The Committee stage is an important step in the process of a Bill becoming a law for a number of reasons.

One of the key reasons why it's so important is because **this is the stage when members of the public get to provide direct input on the content of a Bill and whether it should become law.**

You have a right to share your thoughts on proposed Bills. You might want to share your support for a particular Bill that you think is essential. Or you might wish to suggest changes or bring up important considerations from your own experience or from your community. Or maybe you don't agree that a Bill should be passed and you want to share why.

The Committee stage is an opportunity for you to share any relevant thoughts and concerns with people who are responsible for making recommendations about a Bill and suggesting changes.

Any member of the public is able to share their input at this stage in the process. You can do this one of two ways.

You can provide input to the Committee by presenting your views in person before the Committee or by submitting your input in writing.

If you are interested in presenting to the Committee in person about a Bill, you can contact the **Office of the Legislative Counsel** to get your name added to the list of presenters.

After the Committee decides when to meet about a Bill, you will receive notice from the Office of the Legislative Counsel letting you know the date and time of the meeting so you can attend and present your input.

You can also submit your thoughts in writing. You can do this through the Office of the Legislative Counsel either by mail or electronically. There is no deadline for written submissions, but it is important to make your submissions as soon as possible so the Committee has time to review them.

Once the Bill has passed through the Committee stage, it is then **sent back to the House of Assembly**. When the Committee returns a bill to the House of Assembly, this may include recommendations for changes to the Bill.

When the Bill is returned to the House of Assembly, MLAs might engage in further debate about the Bill. MLAs are allowed to speak more than once at this debate. Sometimes the debate is longer and more in-depth at this stage.

The Bill is then presented for a **third reading where a final vote will happen**. This step might involve a very quick approval of the Bill by MLAs. But there can sometimes be more debate at this point if proper notice has been given in advance.

If a Bill is approved at its third reading, it then receives **Royal Assent** from the Lieutenant Governor. At this point a Bill is no longer called a Bill. It is called an Act. This means it has officially become part of our law.



Democracy is not something you believe in or a place to hang your hat, but it's something you do. You participate. If you stop doing it, democracy crumbles.

Abbie Hoffman

Tips for effective communication



You write in order to change the world. If you alter, even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then you can change it.

James Baldwin

The following are some tips for effectively communicating with your MLA. We've focused on written communication (sending an email or writing a letter), but many of these tips could also apply if you call your MLA's office or speak to a representative in person.

1. **Find out who your MLA is.** The first step is to find out which MLA represents your community. You can write to any MLA – and you may wish to write to a particular MLA who has some expertise on a particular topic or has spoken out before about the issue that matters to you. But the best starting place would be to contact the MLA who is responsible for the community in which you live. As we discussed above, MLAs are responsible for representing the needs and concerns of the communities that elect them. Visit [here](#) to access a full list of Nova Scotia's MLAs, which includes their biographies, information about which community they serve, and their contact information.
2. **Be respectful.** This doesn't mean not showing emotion. Many of the issues that we want to speak to our MLAs about impact our lives in significant ways, and so it is reasonable to write from a place of strong feeling. Your emotions are valid. But your message will be more impactful and taken more seriously if it doesn't include abusive language. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't say how you feel about an issue (including if you feel frustrated or upset). But in order to foster meaningful dialogue and understanding, it's important to communicate your thoughts and feelings in a constructive manner.
3. **Be clear and concise.** You don't need to write a long letter for it to be impactful. MLAs receive a lot of letters, emails, and calls from members of the public on a regular basis. Yours doesn't need to be pages and pages for it to stand out and be taken seriously. It's much more important that it clearly explains what you are asking for from your MLA and why this issue is so important.
4. **State your main point early on.** The most effective letters get to the point quickly. It's best to share your main point and your letter's purpose within the first couple of sentences of your letter. For example, if you are concerned about the lack of affordable and accessible mental health resources in our province, start your letter with this point! You could write something like, "I'm writing to you because I'm concerned about Nova Scotia's lack of mental health resources

that people can afford and access. I'm asking that our government do something about this issue, because many people in my community are suffering needlessly. I would like to see our province put more funding into this vital form of healthcare."

- 5. Share WHY an issue matters to you.** How are you or your community impacted? Letters that speak from personal experience can help your MLA understand why an issue is so important. If you feel comfortable sharing personal stories about how an issue has impacted your life or the lives of your loved ones, this can be **a powerful way of showing your MLA why it is essential to take meaningful action.**
- 6. Write about why an issue affects ALL of us.** It is also important to explain how an issue impacts all of us, or many of us. Politicians are very focused on the **public interest**, so they will likely pay more attention to issues that impact the public at large. Give some space in your letter to explain the big picture. For example, if you're a young person who is writing to your MLA about the lack of affordable housing in Nova Scotia, you can start by describing how this is an issue that affects youth. But your letter will be even more impactful if you stress that this is also an issue that affects a large and diverse portion of the population, including senior citizens, newcomers to Canada, single parents, and many others.
- 7. Write in your own voice.** The most effective communication comes from the heart. There is no need to use fancy language or to try to sound like a politician yourself when you write to your MLA. Write what comes naturally. It is your letter, so it should express YOU!
- 8. Make sure you're writing to the right person.** In Canada, we have both a provincial and federal government, and these different levels of government have different responsibilities. This means that **some issues fall under the provincial umbrella and some issues fall under the federal umbrella.** Your MLA is part of the provincial government, and so they are the ones to contact about issues that fall under the province's responsibility, such as hospitals, education, and natural resources. Some issues, such as criminal law, are federal responsibilities. So if, for example, you want to propose updates to our Criminal Code, you would need to contact your Member of Parliament (MP), who is part of the federal government. You can find information about who your MP is and how to contact them [here](#).
- 9. Sign off with a respectful closing and a hope for a response.** The best way to close a letter (or email) is a hopeful nudge toward next steps. For example, you could write, "I look forward to hearing back from you and learning what your office plans to do about this important issue."
- 10. Follow up with a phone call.** After you've sent your letter, it can be impactful to call your MLA's office to ask if they've reviewed your letter. This phone call can be a good opportunity to discuss some of the points you've made and ask what concrete steps will be taken to address your concerns.

Template letter to your MLA

The following is an example of the kind of letter that you can send to your MLA.

We've used the current housing crisis as an example of the kind of issue that Nova Scotians may want to write to their MLAs about. But you can tailor this template to **any issue that matters to you**.

Our letter is intended only for reference purposes and to inspire you to think about what issues YOU want to raise. We encourage you to write to your MLA **in your own words** and about issues that you feel deserve attention and action.

[Today's date]

The Honourable [MLA's first name and last name]

MLA, [Specify riding]

[MLA's office address]

Re: [State your topic. For example, the housing crisis in Nova Scotia]

Dear *[MLA's first name and last name]*

As your constituent, I am writing to express my concerns about the affordable housing crisis in Nova Scotia. I understand that the Province has undertaken some action to address this issue, for example through creating the Affordable Housing Commission. But I feel like this is not enough. We do not need more reports telling us that there is a crisis, because we know and many of us feel the effects of this crisis on a daily basis. I encourage you to remind Premier Tim Houston that we need meaningful action now to prevent this crisis from getting worse.

[Make your letter personal! Tell your MLA why a particular issue impacts you and your community. The most effective letters are those that help our leaders understand why an issue is so important and how it impacts the people they represent.]

I live in *[community's name]*, where I have seen many of my neighbours and friends affected by the rising costs of living and the housing crisis. My neighbourhood is mainly made up of apartment buildings and houses divided into rental units. It has been a long time since anyone I know has been able to even think about saving to buy a house, because it seems like only a very small percentage of people are able to afford houses anymore.

I saw a recent *Globe and Mail* report that says that on average you need to

have a yearly income of \$78,000 in order to afford a one-bedroom apartment in Halifax. This is disheartening. I am terrified that when my landlord raises my rent again then my family will have to choose between buying groceries and paying our rent. We are already very close to that point.

I have tried searching repeatedly for a more affordable place to live. But because so many people are in crisis searching for affordable housing, I don't even get a call or an email back from prospective landlords. I realize that the Province has put some money into developing some affordable units in particular communities in the HRM. But this does not help those of us who are living in a state of constant anxiety that we will get evicted from the places we live now because we can't afford to pay our rent and basic living expenses. When the current rent cap is no longer in place at the end of 2023, I fear my landlord will raise the rent so much that my family will have to leave our home and will have nowhere to live.

[Write about the public interest component. How does the issue you're writing about affect the community broadly?]

I know this is an issue that affects many of us in *[community's name]*. It also affects many people across the HRM and across Nova Scotia. I know many seniors and young people who have had to move in with other family members because they can no longer afford to live independently. I know families who have been forced into significant debt in order to pay their rent and afford food. We all know that this is not a sustainable way to live. I am worried that my neighbours and friends will run out of options and end up homeless.

I ask that you write back and let me know what you and your colleagues plan to do to address this crisis in a meaningful way. I look forward to your reply.

[First name and last name, contact information (phone number, email address, mailing address)]

Resources

The following websites are valuable resources for understanding our political system and laws. We encourage you to explore these resources as a way to deepen your understanding of how to be an engaged citizen.

The Legal Information Society of Nova Scotia – Visit www.legalinfo.org for lots of plain language legal information, videos, guides, and other resources. You can also chat, email, or call them with questions about the law.

- ▶ **More:** The Legal Information Society of Nova Scotia (LISNS) has been supporting Nova Scotians to understand the law and access legal support since 1987. With a vision for access to justice in action and a mission to empower people to identify, prevent, and solve legal issues, our organization offers a wide range of supports and resources. With particular support for eradicating workplace sexual harassment, supporting victims of sexual violence, and with specific guidance and resources for newcomers, youth, and women navigating family law issues, LISNS has a strong history of empowering marginalized groups.

The Nova Scotia College of Social Workers – Visit nscsw.org to find a social worker and learn about events and advocacy initiatives.

- ▶ **More:** The Nova Scotia College of Social Workers (NSCSW) exists to serve and protect Nova Scotians by effectively regulating the profession of social work. They are responsible for ensuring that Nova Scotians receive the services of skilled and competent social workers who are knowledgeable, ethical, qualified, and accountable to the people who receive their services. NSCSW also works in solidarity with Nova Scotians to advocate for policies that improve social conditions, challenge injustice and value diversity.

Social workers are everywhere – working in health and community services, hospitals and clinics, schools, libraries, and more – and advocacy is an essential component of their practice. All across Nova Scotia you can find social workers supporting people in navigating complex systems to access health care, education, employment and housing, every day; they are uniquely positioned to identify and address systemic gaps, provide key services and programs, and connect communities to what they need, while applying their skills to build a more just world.

- ▶ **Campaign School** – Visit women.novascotia.ca/campaign-school for a free online training course aimed at women who are interested in running for political office.
- ▶ **Equal Voice** – Visit equalvoice.ca for resources, information, and skill development for women and gender diverse people who want to become politically engaged or run for office.
- ▶ **Springtide's Three Minute Citizen** – Visit [here](#) to watch a series of 11 videos explaining Canadian democracy in plain language.

Visit [here](#) to access a full list of Nova Scotia's MLAs, which includes their biographies, information about which community they serve, and their contact information. You can also use [this link](#) to look up your MLA based on your home address.

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