Further to ERS Scotland’s written and oral evidence to the committee’s lobbying inquiry, I thought you might be interested in a short summary of a public event we held last week to ask ‘Is lobbying a problem in Scotland’.

Around 50 people, representing NGOs, lobbying firms, and individual citizens came together to hear from SCVO and Unlock Democracy about their reasons for opposing and supporting the register respectively.

We then had over an hour of discussion and debate about the prospects of a lobbying register.

It is fair to say there was a positive clear consensus about the need to improve the quality of our democracy and democratic engagement, and for many people in the room, a lobbying register, whilst not acting as a panacea, would go some way to improving citizens’ views of politics.

Key questions which the debate raised included:

- Would a register improve access/encourage participation or would it prove to be both a burden and a barrier?
- Could a register capture all lobbying activity and/or the "right" activity? Does it have to?

We would suggest the last point is crucial. No piece of legislation is perfect and prevents unethical activity from ever taking place. But taking action now will reduce that risk and provide deterrent/encouragement to engage positively and openly.

It was also clear from the citizen voices in the room that their perception is very different from that of those of us who regularly engage with the parliament. They do have the impression that the powerful and connected have better quality of access to politicians than they do as citizens.

Looking at this from the point of view of the citizen is crucial, both in principle and in order to inform how any system would operate. We would suggest that questions of whether responsibility lies with decision makers or lobbyists is a red herring. The question should perhaps instead be what does the citizen need to make sense of what lobbying activity is taking place and decisions should flow from that as necessary.

I have selected a few tweets (copied below) from the evening to give you a flavour of the discussion. Do let me know if you would like to meet and discuss further.
Additionally, you may be interested in this article from the Guardian, (which was coincidentally published during the meeting). Whilst it does focus on Westminster, it is an interesting insight into the wide range of tactics lobbyists can use. http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/mar/12/lobbying-10-ways-corporations-influence-government

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17 MARCH 2014

Keith Geddes from Pagoda PR says he is relaxed about a register #lobbying

Labour staffer says @scotparl is more open & democratic but business is potentially influencing decisions eg re procurement #lobbying

@JohnWilsonMSP says being more transparent is an essential part of improving citizens relationships with politics. #lobbying
Should be doing all we can to open up transparency as we do need a #lobbying register says @JohnWilsonMSP

Weber Shandwick employee points out voluntary codes are in place but recognises reputational gain of a #lobbying register

@AlcoholFocus support a register and mention that @scvotweet should be clear that there is disagreement within SCVO about #lobbying register

The links to human rights and equalities have been raised which is really interesting #lobbying
Should 'missing million' non-voters should be asked to give evidence to committee about #lobbying?

Community councillor says he feels @unlockdemocracy et al brings people like him closer to politics. #lobbying

Was sceptical about #lobbying register says citizen voice but after this debate I am in favour as it will help give us a bigger picture