Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Lobbying (Scotland) Bill

Written submission received from Quarriers

Quarriers is one of Scotland’s largest health and social care charities supporting thousands of disadvantaged people each year. We support vulnerable children, young people, adults and families who face challenging circumstances such as homelessness, learning and physical disabilities and epilepsy. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Standards Procedures and Public Appointments Committee call for evidence on the proposed Lobbying (Scotland) Bill.

Consultation Questions

1. Do you agree that the Bill is necessary and that the establishment of a Lobbying Register is desirable?

Many of the people Quarriers supports people feel disengaged from the democratic process due to inequalities of power and participation. All citizens and groups, including disabled and vulnerable people must be able to have a strong voice in the political process. The openness and transparency of the Scottish Parliament is a real strength in this regard.

Therefore, while we recognise the importance of accountability, we believe it is vital that legislation which introduces additional requirements on those seeking to engage with elected representatives does not in any way disempower third sector organisations or the people they support from engaging with the Scottish Parliament.

2. How will the Bill affect you or your organisation?

Quarriers consults widely with the people we support and our staff and as an organisation we value the opportunity to influence policy and legislation through lobbying to ensure these views are expressed and acknowledged within the legislative process. Under the proposals Quarriers will need to enter onto the register and create a system for recording all of our political engagement which comes under the scope of the legislation.

We also place emphasis on ensuring that the people we support have opportunities to engage in the political process on issues that matter to them. Facilitating meetings with MSPs is an important part of this and these can take place on an individual basis but also collectively through the Quarriers Discovery Group led by adults with learning disabilities and Quarriers VIP group led by young people supported in our youth housing services. A lot of our face to face engagement with elected members is therefore part of helping to facilitate an MSP/Minister coming to meet with people we support. We feel clarity is need on whether the communication that takes place as part of that process is now to be regarded as regulated lobbying by our organisation.
3. Registration is triggered only when lobbying is being done in exchange for payment (either as a consultant or an employee) and does not capture lobbying carried out in the course of voluntary work or when it is done by an individual on his or her own behalf. Do you agree with this approach?

Yes.

4. Do the provisions set out in the Bill succeed in striking a balance between capturing information of value and ensuring that access and participation with the work of Parliament and Government is not discouraged?

We are concerned about the increased bureaucracy which would result from a Lobbying Register and the impact this may have on the ability of third sector organisations and individuals can to ensure their MSPs are well informed about the decisions they make. There is a danger therefore that this could contribute to a widening of inequality of access to the political process in Scotland.

One way to increase the accountability and openness of decision making processes would be for the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament to publish Ministers’ and Members of the Scottish Parliament’s diaries. This would allow for greater transparency without placing additional and unnecessary requirements on third sector organisations who are trying to give the people they support a stronger voice.

5. Do you feel that the definitions and exclusions are sufficiently clear? Do they, for example, allow individuals and organisations to easily know whether their activity requires to be registered?

There is some scope for ambiguity particularly around whether the activity of third sector organisations that helps individuals to engage with elected representatives would require to be registered. Guidance which clearly states the rules and the obligations on all lobbyists, organisations and people who contact their MSPs must be communicated widely and effectively.

Lorne Berkley
Policy Manager
Quarriers
30 November 2015