Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Lobbying (Scotland) Bill

Written submission received from Volunteer Scotland

Who we are

Volunteer Scotland is the National Centre for Volunteering and receives grant support from the Scottish Government and others to:

- research, demonstrate and measure the impact made by volunteers
- support paid staff and volunteers to develop skills through accessing training and easy to use volunteer development tools, policies and good practice
- offer a one stop digital gateway to everyone in Scotland who might want to find volunteer opportunities
- support organisations to post and advertise new volunteer opportunities and events through web-based tools
- provide an expert disclosure service for voluntary organisations
- help organisations and people who can influence volunteering such as funders, Government, and policy makers
- work with partners to support projects, innovation and creativity in volunteering.

Our views on the Lobbying (Scotland) Bill

Volunteer Scotland welcomes this opportunity to provide our views on the Lobbying (Bill) Scotland.

We believe that there is a need for further clarity regarding the requirement for registration and the provision of more information as to whether all communications with a MSP, a member of the Scottish Government or a junior Scottish Minister would be deemed to be lobbying as described in the Bill. Like most Third Sector organisations, we neither employ nor engage personnel whose role is solely dedicated to lobbying on behalf of the organisation. However, given our relationship, accountability and duty of care to the Scottish Government and to the Scottish Parliament, we do communicate with politicians and officials. We would seek more information from the Committee as to whether providing information to and meeting with junior Ministers, MSPs and Scottish Government to discuss service delivery, performance and accountability would be deemed as 'lobbying’ as defined by the Bill.

Lobbying is an important part of the political process and Volunteer Scotland supports measures designed to ensure that lobbying in Scotland is made as open and transparent as possible.

We would also support, in principle, the introduction of a statutory register as a means of achieving this objective, though we would suggest that ‘openness and transparency’ could be more easily achieved by other means. For example, this
information already exists within the official diaries of Ministers, Civil Servants and MSPs. Making the relevant sections of these diaries, which record these meetings, publically available would be the most cost effective means of ensuring greater openness and transparency.

A key part of our work is to encourage and encourage greater participatory democracy and are fully supportive of the openness and accessibility of the Scottish Parliament since it was re-established in 1999. We would be concerned that the proposals contained in the Bill to introduce additional requirements on those seeking to engage with elected representatives run counter to these values and may disempower third sector organisations from engaging with the Scottish Parliament.

Lobbying can be seen as a two way process. Recent deliberative citizen engagement concerning a fairer Scotland has shown the importance of lobbying public opinion and ideas for shared goals and priorities essential for good representative government. The key question is about ensuring that processes are in place for the legislature to ensure that it is responding to citizen perspectives, and a strategic focus on the Scotland Performs Framework and is clear about managing vested interests and accountability to the common good.

Also, we are concerned that registering information could prove a significant time-burden to small and medium sized charities and organisations. The requirements of the Bill will have a disproportional impact on these organisations. As stated above, we would be concerned that this would led to them refraining from engaging with the Scottish Parliament and, therefore, unable to play an active part of the democratic process in Scotland.

The Committee must take account of these likely consequences during their scrutiny of the Bill.

Greater engagement in the democratic process, and active participation in decision making is fundamental for the well-being of future generations. Any loss of the Parliament’s principles of openness, ease-of access and accountability must be avoided.

George Thomson  
Chief Executive  
Volunteer Scotland  
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