About Zero Tolerance

Zero Tolerance is a national charity working to end men’s violence against women (VAW) in all its forms. We promote a primary prevention approach, believing that changing societal attitudes, values and structures is the key to ending gender-based violence. We also believe that pervasive gender inequality in our society creates a culture in which VAW is prevalent and tolerated and that this must change. More information about our work can be found on our website, [www.zerotolerance.org.uk](http://www.zerotolerance.org.uk)

Our interest in this inquiry

We are responding to this inquiry because we are a campaigning (rather than a service-providing) charity and as such do a lot of work that could be considered ‘lobbying’. Our core mission is to change social attitudes to violence against women and gender inequality, to bring about a ‘zero tolerance’ culture, and inevitably we seek to influence politicians and decision makers as a key part of that work.

Arguably all third sector organisations are lobbyists to a greater or lesser extent; we are not in business to make money, we exist to bring about change, and often to advocate for the most vulnerable people in society who would otherwise remain unheard. Women who have experienced violence, abuse and exploitation rely on organisations like ours, and many others with whom we work in partnership, to bring their stories and their aspirations to the attention of politicians; and to bring about change that prevents violence and delivers justice for those who have lived with it.

We currently benefit from Scottish Government funding and so we are doubly aware of the need to be open and transparent in how we operate and how we ‘lobby’. This need is incumbent on any organisation which is part of civic society.

Our thoughts on lobbying

We are fairly relaxed about plans to further monitor lobbying activity in Scotland, and welcome analysis of whether or not there have been changes in the way that lobbying is carried out and discussion of what problems there may be with the current approach.

However, we are not fully convinced that a register of lobbyists is needed. A register might prove to be unduly burdensome for small charities and difficult to keep current. We imagine that keeping a register updated, with the staff fluctuations that are common to the voluntary sector due to funding variations and the prevalence of short-term contracts and volunteer usage, would be extremely difficult.
We can however see the potential benefits of a register, in bringing about greater transparency, especially if such a register was searchable by criteria such as whether the lobbyist was working on behalf of an NGO or a private sector organisation. So we are open to persuasion that a register would have more benefits than drawbacks, especially if its design takes account of the existing pressures on small third-sector organisations which are mostly under-resourced and overstretched and so might be over-burdened by a complex registration process.

Our main concern about further regulation of lobbying in Scotland would be the risk of small charities being precluded from taking part in lobbying activities, whether intentionally or most likely as an unintended consequence of over-regulation (this is a significant concern related to the UK Government’s Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administrations Bill).

If it is agreed to do more to register lobbyists and to record lobbying activity in Scotland then we would make the following observations:

- There is a need to capture the activity of people who do not have a public affairs role and are not employed as lobbyists as such but who, because they are corporate leaders, senior judges etc. have the ability to get politicians’ attention (such individuals would not be signed up to e.g. the Association of Professional Political Consultants Code of Conduct or be members of ASPA and there is a risk that their lobbying activity would not be recorded).

- There is a need to take account of the difference between an NGO worker or an unpaid volunteer, doing some lobbying on their special interest as part of a wider campaign geared around delivering social change for the public good; and a paid full-time lobbyist for the corporate sector advocating for a client, for policies which are profit-driven. We have concerns that wealthy organisations and interests have a disproportionate level of access to decision makers simply because they can afford to employ full-time permanent public affairs staff or to buy in public affairs consultancy, and that this disadvantages NGOs and the people they seek to represent.

- There is a need not to stigmatise lobbying; over-regulation can paint it as an unsavoury business, which is about seeking undue influence; whereas it is part of the democratic process and right and proper that experts and interested parties should seek to influence political decision making on their areas of interest and on behalf of people who might otherwise remain voiceless.

- There is a need to capture the lobbying activity of politicians themselves, especially when that lobbying is on behalf of private sector organisations with a profit motive.

- There is a need to identify the extent of lobbying by individuals who are not accountable to an organisation. Whereas receptions, seminars, cross-party group meetings etc. are often well publicised, it can be especially hard to know about meetings that have taken place between MSPs or their officials and private individuals, and yet we know that these can be particularly influential.
We would welcome other moves towards greater transparency, such as the publication of MSPs and officials’ diaries.

We would welcome a voluntary Code of Conduct for lobbyists, if this provided useful guidance about how lobbying should be conducted, which could be especially valuable for smaller organisations who do not have a discrete public affairs post; and will be interested to see what further moves towards transparency are proposed by other respondents.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.

JENNY KEMP
COORDINATOR
ZERO TOLERANCE
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