



**Response to Towards a Public
Affairs Council: Issues Paper**

June 2009

Contact: Chloe Stables
Tel: 020 7520 2474
E-mail: chloe.stables@ncvo-vol.org.uk

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) is the largest general membership body for charities and voluntary organisations in England. Established in 1919, NCVO represents over 7000 organisations, from large 'household name' charities to small groups involved in all areas of voluntary and social action at the local level. NCVO champions voluntary action, our vision is of a society in which people are inspired to make a positive difference to their communities. A vibrant voluntary and community sector deserves a strong voice and the best support. NCVO works to provide that support and voice.

The voluntary and community sector (VCS) has a fundamental right to campaign and to lobby government and parliament. Many charities wish to speak out, to use their voice and experience, and to campaign for the changes that would best help them achieve their purposes.

NCVO supports and encourages charities to fulfil this role as best they can.

Many NCVO members and other VCS organisations attain high levels of transparency and accountability in terms of lobbying activity. However we recognise that there is a need to regulate lobbying activity in order to prevent further ambiguity and mistrust in the political system.

We suggest that 'lobbyists' working for charities should be subject to the same rules and regulations as those employed in-house or working for multi-client agencies. It is important we do not create a two tier system. However, it is also important to recognise that 'lobbyists' from the charity sector are different to their colleagues in the private sector, and are already regulated by the charity commission (specifically, the guidance they have issued around campaigning and political activity – CC9).

NCVO's preference is for a statutory system of registration, administered by an independent body, which would apply to all lobbyists, regardless of sector, above a minimum financial threshold. This would ensure high levels of transparency and accountability and would improve public trust in the political system.

We are not against self-regulation per-se; however we feel there remain a number of significant issues that need to be addressed – not least around independence, universality and the need for membership of one of the three existing membership bodies. We also remain concerned about the potential effect of some of the sanctions proposed (particularly the suggestion of a kitemark scheme or restrictions on access to the Parliamentary estate).

Our answers to the questions are set out below:

1. An independent body, with an independent chair, should hold the statutory register.
2. We do not support the premise that charity 'lobbyists' should have to be a member of one of the three existing membership bodies in order to participate in regulation of their activities. Registration should be direct without any requirement for membership of any lobbyists' association.
3. Costs need to be proportionate. Any costs or administrative requirements should be kept to a low level to avoid negative resource implications for smaller organisations (be they small business or charity).
4. We would be immensely concerned if the sanctions proposed were linked to membership of the three membership bodies – this is undemocratic.

5. The definition proposed by the Working Party seems workable – we welcome the inclusion of charitable interests in these definitions.
6. However (as suggested by the Charity Commission in their response) the wording used may not be entirely appropriate for charity ‘lobbyists’ who are unlikely to define themselves as motivated by financial gain. We support the suggestion made by the Charity Commission that “as part of their paid employment”, “in a paid professional role” or “in a professional capacity” be used as a substitute.
7. With regard to question 4 we support the submission from the Charity Commission - if the purpose of an individual’s role within their organisation is to lobby, they ought to be included in the definition with all the consequences that implies. If however lobbying is something they occasionally do in order to support the broader aims of their role, they should not be included. In practice this would probably mean that most charity chief executives would not be included whilst most Parliamentary officers and campaigners would. This seems proportionate and would avoid the perception that charity chief executives were primarily lobbyists. This definition would seem equally applicable to commercial bodies and their staff.

National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)

Regent’s Wharf, 8 All Saints Street, London N1 9RL

Registered Charity Number: 225922