VAN Briefing
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The voice of the Voluntary Arts

Lobbying politicians and policy makers – an introduction to influencing

The laws of the land, the policies of government departments, the plans of local authorities – i.e. decisions made by elected representatives and public servants – impact on how your arts group operates. You may know exactly what needs to happen in relation to important issues, but to get things done you need to be heard. Power and influence can be gained through networking, public relations and lobbying. Using lobbying means winning allies who are in a position to make things happen.

This briefing looks at what it means to *lobby* and considers ways in which even the smallest group can effect better decision making by politicians and policy makers.

What is lobbying?

Lobbying has been described as *"Action designed to influence the actions of the institutions of government … Its scope includes legislation, regularity and policy decisions, and negotiations on public sector contracts or grants".* Charles Miller (1999).

The aim of lobbying is to educate and inform key decision makers and opinion formers about your concerns and to get help from them in furthering your objectives through the decisions they make. By raising awareness and sharing expertise, lobbying is a way of trying to improve decision-making thereby producing policy and legislation that better fits your needs. In effect it is about using persuasion to make things happen to your benefit.

What are the benefits?

Good lobbying supports:

The democratic process – giving people a voice in shaping policies that affect them.

Society – providing feedback from the grassroots so that government agencies and public servants have enough relevant information to develop useful policies and practice.

Your group/organisation – helping build communications and relationships between you and decision makers and stimulating joint working towards common goals.

Individuals – enabling individuals to develop skills and confidence in expressing their needs.

Lobbying can be short term – to address an immediate issue (e.g. funding crises) – but it is most effective when it is part of a planned and ongoing communications strategy, linking in with other influencing tools such as networking and consultation (see VAN Briefings 96 and 98).

Four things to think about when planning your lobbying

1. What would you like to happen?

For example – outcome is that XYZ funding is more accessible to volunteer led groups.

2. What needs to happen to achieve the outcome?

For example:

- introduce smaller grants that can be more flexible;
- have four application deadlines a year instead of one;
- reduce the application and reporting requirements so that they fit the size of the grant;
- hold a series of talks to explain the new grants and invite voluntary arts groups.

3. Who has responsibility for making this happen?

- who decides arts policy in XYZ?
- who advises them?

4. What do you need to persuade XYZ?

- what facts, figures and examples have you got? e.g. about volunteers finding it hard to access XYZ grants?
- what evidence can you gather of the negative effects of this? e.g. events not held, people missing out.
- what is the thinking behind the current way of doing things and are there bigger issues you'll need to address? e.g. XYZ may offer annual large grants because it has insufficient staff to administer small grants or XYZ is focused on economic regeneration and believes big grants are the best approach.

  If you get to know and understand all the issues, you can offer possible solutions as part of your lobbying strategy.

Planning your Lobbying

1. Your strategy

First you need to know what you want to achieve and what *can* be done. This will entail finding out how policy is created in the organisation you want to approach. If you understand the process you can establish what is already set in stone and what is still fluid. For best results, get in early on policy development. Use networking to make sure you spot opportunities to influence the developments before they have been drafted.

Set out clearly what you want to achieve so that you can quickly and easily explain what it is you want.

Check that your demands are realistic. If what you want costs more than can ever be available or would mean asking for changes to things that have only recently been decided, then it is unlikely that even the most powerful ally will be able to help you.

Consider asking for a series of small changes towards a larger goal – incremental change is often easier for people to manage than total reform.

2. Do your research

Gathering enough information to plan and back your lobbying activity is essential.

Evidence – collect evidence on the need for change. Make sure it shows not only why the current position is bad, but also why the particular solution you are proposing is the best way forward. If you do not know what the solution is, then ensure that you are not just criticising, but are proposing a way that the parties might work together to come up with better way forward.

Intelligence – find out who makes the key decisions and who informs and advises them. Establish what the process and timetables are for decision-making. Check whether other policies, people or budgets might dictate the limits within which change can occur.

Target audience – make a list of the names of people you will need to reach. A 'tree' diagram is useful, with the ultimate decision makers at the top, and the people who advise and influence them as branches.

Decision makers might include:

- ministers and government departments including Assembly and Parliament members (MPs, AMs, TDs, MSPs and MEPs);
- local authority councillors;
- civil servants.

Influencers could be:

- political researchers;
- political party colleagues;
- advisers;
- trade unions;
- the wider community e.g. think-tanks;
- the media.

Look at your 'tree' and start by making contact with the people you already know. Don't forget the parliamentary representative for the area you live in. They may not be directly involved in the issue, but as one of their constituents you are entitled to ask their advice on issues of concern to you.

Decide how to reach each target audience. You might write a letter directly, send them a briefing paper or invite them to an event, or do all three.

However, if a direct approach is not possible, or not likely to work, then use your 'tree' to plot a path from someone you know or can reach to the person who is your ultimate target. Even with a direct approach, it is often worth informing others close to them so that the decision maker is surrounded by people who support your view.

3. Your proposal – the importance of key messages

To turn an influential person into a powerful ally you need to persuade them of both the value of your cause *and* be clear about the action they can take that will make a difference.

Therefore:

- keep to three or four key messages;
- make them concise, clear and convincing;
- use them in *all* communications;
- use them to inform your slogan and branding;
- also use them to influence your choice of case studies and human interest stories to make them 'real'.

In thinking about your messages, look at all angles – not just at what you want to say. You need to anticipate 'hard' questions to prepare for meetings, hearings and media interviews. The following 'message box' will help prepare for all eventualities.

Message box

	YOU	THEM
YOU	What will you say about you?	What will they say about you?
THEM	What is your message about them?	What do they say about themselves?

Your proposal will be a summing up of what your target can do that will deliver real benefits.

It may be in the form of a:

- parliamentary question;
- private members bill;
- amendment;
- contribution to a debate;
- early day motion/petition;
- committee inquiry;
- ministerial meeting;
- sponsored event in the house.

Note: whatever you ask, make sure you ask only for what is within that person's power at that particular time.

4. What do you bring to the table?

Remember, its important to offer something in return for your request to the person you would like as an ally. Take a while to think what they might need e.g.:

- policy expertise;
- better service delivery;
- links with constituents;
- ability to fulfil their duty to respond and represent community needs;
- media coverage.

5. Balance Inside/Outside lobbying

Inside lobbying – means working with politicians, councillors, civil servants, and their advisers.

Outside lobbying – means using support activities to push issues up the political agenda, e.g. media activity, local lobbying, letter writing, rallies, legal interventions.

The balance will vary according to:

- whether the changes you want can be achieved quietly and internally to the organisation concerned, or whether they might need major external pressure;
- the extent to which the changes are likely to win public sympathy;
- the degree to which issues can be simplified for presentation through the media;
- the resources available to you.

Aldis Ozols in ***'How to Lobby Politicians'*** suggests that: *"more influential than individual voters' opinions are party policy, the politician's personal beliefs, and the need to satisfy a sufficient proportion of the public to gain re-election. These factors should be borne in mind when contemplating a political course of action. Sometimes the most appropriate action is trying to change public opinion, rather than communicating directly with politicians".* www.unilob.pl/howtolobby.htm

6. Create alliances

Lobbying is more effective if you can join forces with others because it:

- gives you a stronger voice;
- shows that there is wider support;
- brings in more ideas and communities;
- helps spread the work load.

Look at who else in your area may be affected by the decision. Are they a competitor or potential ally? If they hold opposing views to yours, then make sure you know them. Understanding their arguments will help strengthen yours.

Note: you can ensure you bring your followers with you by paying particular attention to internal communication. Make sure members and participants know your key message so that they can act as advocates amongst people they know.

7. Finally, add that bit extra…

You can also take action yourself to influence policy decisions through:

- responding to consultations – by national, regional or local government;
- entering debates – providing briefings to your elected representative;
- statutory/select committees – you could suggest an inquiry;
- Freedom of Information Act – ask for information about what has been happening as a way of spotlighting an issue;
- The Human Rights Act – can be used to proof legislation against human rights standards and negotiate better standards of public service;
- UN treaty monitoring committees e.g.:
  - on rights of the child (CRC);
  - on elimination of racial discrimination (CERD);
  - on elimination of discrimination against women (CEDAW) can likewise be brought into play as can National Action Plans (NAPs) to tackle poverty at EU level;
- Community planning/County Development Plans provide opportunities for making public services responsive to needs of the community.

An important note for charities:

You *must* check to what extent you can work to influence government decisions and retain your status as a recognised charity.

Check your governing documents. These will outline what your objects are and help define what activities you can and cannot engage in.

Contact and confirm with the government body who has responsibility for charity legislation in your jurisdiction e.g.:

- The Charity Commission for England and Wales – www.charity-commission.gov.uk
- Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator – www.oscr.org.uk
- Revenue Commissioners in Republic of Ireland – www.revenue.ie
- HM Revenue and Customs for Northern Ireland – www.hmrc.gov.uk/charities

Note: currently there is no legal framework for the registration of charities in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland. Organisations are recognised as charities for tax purposes. This is in the process of changing with forthcoming charity law legislation in both NI and RoI.

For further information about charity law reform see: www.dsdni.gov.uk (NI) and www.pobail.ie (RoI).

Case Study

UK National Lottery Shares 2009

Protecting local arts participation was the desired outcome of the Voluntary Arts Network's response to the UK National Lottery funding consultation on the split of money for arts.

VAN recognised the need for a clear voice from the sector. To encourage umbrellas and local groups to respond they developed a 'Toolkit', i.e. short briefing on the issues. It specifically highlighted the sections in the consultation document that were relevant to the arts. The toolkit was made available in print, e-mail and on the website, and a link to it was included on all outgoing e-mails and correspondence.

Subsequently it has been announced that Lottery shares for the arts will be retained for ten years from 2009-2019.

Further Information & Resources

1. Government

- **Local government links** for all European countries – www.oultwood.com
- **Government** in general, including regional government, e.g. Government Office North East in the UK – www.direct.gov.uk
- **UK MPs** – www.parliament.uk
- **England** – MPs/Peers – www.parliament.uk
- **Northern Ireland** – Members of the Legislative Assembly – www.niassembly.gov.uk
- **Scotland** – MSPs – www.scottish.parliament.uk
- **Wales** – AMs for Wales – www.wales.gov.uk
- **Republic of Ireland** – Teachtaí Dála/Senators – www.oireachtas.ie and www.irlgov.ie – includes links to local authorities (see 'All State Organisations')
- **Local authorities** in the UK see 'directory' pages – www.direct.gov.uk

2. Policy Support

See policy forums and sections of:

- **England** – National Council for Voluntary Organisations – www.ncvo-vol.org.uk
  National Association for Voluntary and Community Action offers support on policy and information on Local Area Agreements – www.navca.org.uk/stratwork
- **Northern Ireland** – Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action – www.communityni.org
- **Republic of Ireland** – The Wheel – www.wheel.ie
- **Scotland** – Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations – www.scvo.org.uk
  Scottish Civic Forum – www.civicforum.org.uk
- **Wales** – Wales Council for Voluntary Action – www.wcva.org.uk

3. Reading material

- ***'VAN Briefings'*** –
  These include relevant briefings on networking, consultation, organising events, dealing with the media etc. – www.voluntaryarts.org/publications
- ***'Good Tips for Lobbying'*** – www.pressureworks.org/usefulstuff/how/lobby.html
- Miller, Charles –
  'Politico's Guide to Political Lobbying', Politico's Publishing Ltd (2000), ISBN 1902301250
- Lattimer, Mark –
  'The Campaigning Handbook, Directory of Social Change (2000)', ISBN: 1900360632

Our thanks to Anne Moore of Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action for this briefing.
Contact Anne for information on NICVA lobbying training on 028 9087 7777.

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Information contained here may go out of date and you are therefore advised to check its currency. Updated information may be available on the VAN website: www.voluntaryarts.org

Disclaimer: Reasonable precautions have been taken to ensure the information in this document is accurate. However, it is not intended to be legally comprehensive; it is designed to provide guidance in good faith at the stated date but without accepting liability. We therefore recommend you take appropriate professional advice before taking action on any of the matters covered herein.

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