



Political mateship or political mayhem – how to avoid being lobbied into a political scandal

Lobbying is a vital element of any democracy and a part of life in local government. Councillors have an essential role to play in ensuring council decisions that affect their communities are not influenced unduly by the interests of lobbyists. But this is often easier said than done. So how can elected members avoid being lobbied into a web of political scandal?

The importance of lobbying in local government

Lobbying often labours under the misconception of being a corrupt business, mainly due to scandals that undermine its true purpose. Yet at the heart of modern professional lobbying is the serious and valuable process of research, strategy, analysis and importantly communication of public opinion to decision-makers.

Lobbying allows individuals, community groups and businesses to have a say in the decisions that affect them. Governments deprived of the views of their constituents cannot accurately represent the beliefs of the publics they stand for.

On a local government level, if elected representatives are not in touch with the views of their communities, they are essentially running blind, relying solely on bureaucrats and headlines for advice on decisions that affect their municipalities. This is hardly an effective means of representing the often diverse and ever-changing views of growing communities.

How to recognise lobbying

Lobbying in local government encompasses any communication between councillors and the community that includes representations to elected members by special interest groups and individuals with an interest in a particular council decision.

Councillors are commonly lobbied by members of the community in an attempt to influence council decisions which may pertain to a number of issues, including development applications, upgrades to local facilities and revenue decisions, including the setting of rates.

A good lobbyist will always reveal who they are representing and what their interest in a particular council matter is.

Inappropriate lobbying

Councillors risk becoming involved in inappropriate lobbying if they are seen to be granting lobbyists preferential consideration or treatment based on factors other than the merits of a matter. Examples include accepting undisclosed payments or benefits during a decision that affects the donor's interests and/or disclosing confidential information while being lobbied.

Elected members should ask themselves whether the activities they are participating in with lobbyists undermine the principles of impartial decision-making.

Ways to help ensure fair lobbying include:

- Being alert to the motives and interests of those who seek to lobby in relation to a council decision;
- Being aware of which person, organisation or company the lobbyist is representing;
- Ensuring as much as possible that competing parties are treated fairly and consistently;
- Ensuring that confidential information is not disclosed; and
- Ensuring no action is being taken which involves a breach of a relevant code of conduct.

How to maintain transparency

It's vital for councillors to ensure that any involvement with lobbyists remains completely transparent and open to public scrutiny which can be challenging given the unique environment in which councillors work. Elected members often have little time during business hours to attend to council matters, have limited availability to support staff and have a high community demand for their own availability, making it sometimes impossible to avoid informal discussions with lobbyists.

However, there are a number of ways councillors can help ensure transparency, including documenting meetings with constituents, where possible conducting meetings in official locations, such as council offices, having another person present at meetings and asking people who have requested a meeting to put their arguments in writing.

It's clear that we need lobbying in today's democratic society in order to keep governments in touch with the real world. In order for lobbying in local government to work to the best advantage of communities and councils, elected members must remain cognisant of its potential dangers and aware of their obligation to ensure that any lobbying they participate in is fair and impartial.

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