

Written evidence submitted by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR)

About CIPR

The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) is the professional body for public relations practitioners in the UK. With 9,500 members involved in all aspects of public relations, it is the largest body of its kind in Europe. The CIPR advances the public relations profession in the UK by making its members accountable through a code of conduct, developing best practice, representing its members and raising standards through professional development. The CIPR, through the PR Academy, provides the CIPR Public Affairs Diploma, a professional qualification specific to lobbying

The CIPR, along with the Association of Professional Political Consultants (APPC) and the Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA), founded the UK Public Affairs Council (UKPAC) after a recommendation from the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee for a public register of lobbyists. (The PRCA resigned as a member of UKPAC in December 2011). Each member body in UKPAC (currently APPC and CIPR) has a code of conduct to which its members must adhere and a disciplinary process to be used in the event of any breach of its code. Members of the APPC and CIPR that meet the UKPAC definition of lobbying are required to register.

The CIPR has several sectoral groups, one of which is the CIPR Public Affairs Group. The group has over 700 members and is made up of communications professionals who have regular dealings with Government, or the institutions of Government, in its very widest sense.

The following response was developed following a discussion of CIPR Public Affairs Group members in November 2020. The individuals who took part had experience of engaging with APPGs and working to provide secretariat support for APPGs, helping Parliamentarians to set up, organise and lead the groups.

Introduction & Benefits of APPGs

There was a consensus amongst CIPR Public Affairs Group members who attended the discussion event that APPGs, in general, played a valuable role in the policy-making process. Many members spoke about how APPGs had helped to raise previously little-known issues up the political agenda, with issues covered by APPGs ranging from business, to medicine, to social, and more. Members spoke about how, at their best, APPGs can drive a political debate and lead to significant policy change.

An APPG can give credibility and gravitas to an issue, helping generate awareness, media coverage or Ministerial interest and can help clarify issues and shift the debate to address the most pertinent concerns. On subjects where there are lots of interested parties, a good APPG can bring people together and channel effective advocacy, and on niche issues, such as rare disease, APPGs can raise concerns up the agenda. APPGs can also help secure high profile speakers for Parliamentarians to hear from and can help new MPs or Peers to develop policy interests and expertise by giving them leadership roles as Chairs, Vice Chairs and Officers. Moreover, APPGs are more transparent and accessible than single party

interest groups or Whatsapp groups, making them a more open part of the policy-making process for the public.

Members did, however, acknowledge that there were some areas where the role of APPGs could improve, particularly around their (a) Governance, (b) Transparency and (C) Role and Purpose.

Governance of APPGs

Members of the discussion group highlighted that often both Parliamentarians and the secretariat organisations could be unsure about their roles on the APPG, although it was agreed that Parliamentary staff were very helpful when asked about APPG matters.

Attendees were unsure what the role of the secretariat should be and how much responsibility the secretariat has for the APPG it provides services for. It was felt that some secretariats provided effective support services for their APPGs. In some APPGs, the parliamentary offices of the Chairs, Vice Chairs and Officers led the main work of the APPG, whilst in others this was the secretariat's role.

The group agreed that clearer, more accessible guidance from Parliament would be useful in supporting secretariats and Parliamentarians. This should also include information about what mechanisms there are to raise or deal with concerns about APPGs, and what best practice should look like.

Transparency

The group highlighted issues with transparency around APPGs and many had witnessed bad practice during their time in the Public Affairs industry. There were examples where APPGs were used by secretariats for commercial gain, such as communications agencies that had advertised their role as a secretariat in order to gain clients, or blocking requests to that APPG from competitor organisations. In one case, there was an example of a secretariat offering sponsorship opportunities for an APPG, to try and benefit commercially from their role. There were also examples of secretariats using APPGs to access Parliamentary passes. Those in the discussion acknowledged that APPGs were required to declare funding received but highlighted that 'gifts in kind', such as support for a report, were not declared consistently. It was felt that there was little scrutiny of the declaration process and that Parliament rarely reprimanded those who did not declare spending or 'gifts in kind'.

The examples above are not in line with the CIPR's Code of Conduct or Lobbying Register and CIPR members would face disciplinary measures if they were involved in these.

However, there was a feeling that there is a greater role for politicians, Parliament and the lobbying industry to ensure ethical practices when it comes to APPGs. The discussion group agreed that more guidance should be provided to Public Affairs professionals on providing secretariat services to APPGs, but that Parliamentarians also needed similar guidance from Parliament on what good and bad practice looks like.

Role and Purpose

The group highlighted that there were more than 600 APPGs as of November 2020, and that some of these APPGs were inactive and met irregularly. There was also concern that there was overlap between APPGs and the topics they examined and that some could be consolidated.

The group asked whether attendance and engagement with APPGs should be monitored and whether inactive groups should be disbanded by Parliamentary authorities before the AGMs.

CIPR members had found that while some APPGs have active and engaged memberships, in others it is only the Chair who takes an active role, with other Parliamentarians agreeing to join the group in name only in order for it to be established, but with little capacity or intention to actively engage in the group's work.

One attendee highlighted that, with Cross-Party Groups in the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Parliamentary authorities had overcome the issue of inactive groups by introducing 'short life' working groups, which are time limited to address one particular issue. These groups were popular with MSPs and it was agreed that they could ensure valuable work is conducted without keeping a group running indefinitely.

Conclusion

As highlighted above, APPGs play a valuable role in the policy-making process for Parliament and should be supported to continue. When APPGs are well run and active, they can be very effective, offering opportunities for Parliamentarians to engage with experts and enhance their understanding of important issues. However, there are concerns around a lack of clarity of governance, the transparency for secretariats and the role and number of APPGs. These concerns should be addressed with the provision of guidance outlining best practice for Parliamentarians and those who wish to engage with them, and support from the Parliamentary Authorities to challenge bad practice.

The examples listed above were provided during a CIPR Public Affairs Group discussion, but there will be many more examples from public affairs professionals of both good and bad practice when it comes to APPGs.

The CIPR would therefore like to support the Committee on Standards by offering to facilitate a meeting in early 2021 with a group of experienced public affairs professionals to discuss these issues further and in more detail.

20 November 2020