



LGPA

LOCAL GOVERNMENT
PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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Introduction

Background

There is very limited information about perceptions of public affairs and lobbying organisations amongst decision-makers in the local government sector.

LGPA wanted to explore current perceptions of public affairs and lobbying in the local government sector.

Focus of the research

This research study aims to answer the following questions:

- Which policy areas would local government decision-makers like to have more influence over?
- Have local authorities been conducting public affairs or lobbying campaigns?
- How effective have those campaigns been?
- What do local government decision-makers think of public bodies lobbying on their behalf?
- What are local government decision-makers views of public affairs or lobbying support organisations?

Methodology

In order to better understand views on public affairs in local government, it was proposed that the main thrust of the research would be with chief executives. However, in addition to this, a smaller number of interviews were also held with leaders and heads of communications to gain their perspectives.

Local Government Public Affairs Survey

The Research Unit (TRU) used a semi-structured survey approach. This means that the survey contains quantitative scale questions like how effective have you found public affairs professionals? And, also, qualitative questions like what are the barriers to your council conducting more campaigns?

The reason for taking this approach is that LGPA are focused on looking at why local government decision-makers have certain perceptions of public affairs as well as understanding how they rate the current state of the sector. Given these dual aims, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was appropriate.

The large majority of interviews were conducted by telephone.

The sample structure was as follows:

Counties	10 Chief Executives
Districts	10 Chief Executives
London Authorities	10 Chief Executives
Met Authorities	10 Chief Executives
Unitary Authorities	10 Chief Executives

The sample was also structured by government region and as much as possible by CPA rating to give a representative spread of chief executive opinion.

For comparison, TRU also conducted 10 leader interviews and 10 head of communications interviews. These were included to see whether opinions differed between groups

and whether there were differences in perceptions regarding public affairs. The large majority of these supplementary interviews were conducted with councils where the chief executive had already been interviewed. In a small number of cases, interviews were held with deputy leaders and senior management team members acting as proxies.

Interpretation of the data

This research project focuses on perceptions of public affairs in local government. However, this does not mean that this relatively small sample is without statistical rigour. The results do not provide any statistically robust information at a local authority type level. But if single tier and counties are taken as a group, the margin of error is about + 13%. Where percentages in this report do not sum to 100, this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of "don't know" categories, or the opportunity for multiple answers to a question. Throughout the report, in text and charts, an asterisk (*) denotes a value less than half a per cent.

Executive Summary

Lobbying and key areas of influence

Across the board, chief executives and leaders wanted greater influence with central government and none of them felt they were doing too much lobbying. Nine in ten chief executives said they had been involved in some kind of campaign in the last twelve months.

The majority of chief executives and leaders felt that they were doing the right amount of lobbying but almost half felt that they were not doing enough. There was also an awareness that councils could do more campaigning together.

The key areas where local government decision-makers would like greater influence with central government are:

- grant settlement and fair funding
- housing and the growth agenda
- strategic planning and transport
- greater freedom from central government regulation

Campaign Effectiveness

The campaigns councils had been involved in, with the exception of grant settlement, tended to be issue-based like concessionary fares or local like campaigning for local regeneration projects. About two-thirds of chief executives said that these campaigns had been effective. Leaders tended to be less positive about the effectiveness of these campaigns.

Campaign Effectiveness of Local Government Bodies

Feeding in views to bodies like the LGA is a key part of local government campaigning. Chief executives are almost as positive about the effectiveness of bodies like the LGA as their own campaigns. Indeed, leaders and heads of communications tend to see these bodies as more effective than council campaigns at influencing central government. However, there are important limitations to these national campaigns as they are seen as requiring broad consensus and less equipped to deal with local differences.

Barriers to greater campaigning

The main barriers to councils conducting more public affairs campaigns are 'capacity and resources'. Over half the chief executives identify these as barriers for more public affairs. Three in ten chief executives also have concerns about the value for money offered by public campaigns. Chief executives also have concerns about the popularity of undertaking public affairs campaigns at the expense of core services as well as concerns about the politics involved.

Leaders, on the whole, are more positive about campaigning but do emphasise the resources involved and the political dimension to the effectiveness of public affairs campaigning. Heads of communications also focus on resources as the significant barrier to more public affairs work.

Effectiveness of public affairs professionals

Less than half the chief executives we interviewed had used public affairs professionals. It was clear from these discussions that chief executives, to a greater extent, judged the effectiveness of public affairs professionals on the basis of outcome. Two-thirds of chief executives who have used professional lobbyists have found them effective. Though a small sample, this finding does indicate that where councils have used lobbyists the results tend to be positive most of the time. Significantly, much fewer leaders and heads of communications had experience of working with lobbyists.

Key Issues and policy influence

All the chief executives and leaders interviewed by TRU said that they would like more influence on central government policy. More than a quarter of the chief executives interviewed spontaneously identified wanting greater influence around their current financial settlements or fair funding issues, and the importance of this has been exacerbated by the credit crunch. Linked to issues around funding, several chief executives also identified the funding of adult social services as a key issue.

'The overall budgetary position and the efficiency agenda..'

Chief Executive, Metropolitan Council

'Adult health and social care. Spending here is such a nightmare.'

Executive, County Council

'We are being challenged financially. We are also affected by the planning and the local development framework as we are a growth point.'

Chief Executive, District Council

About one in five chief executives pointed to housing and the growth agenda.

'Housing and the growth agenda are key areas we would like greater influence over.'

Chief Executive, County Council

'I would like more influence around housing policy, grant level, transport and regeneration.'

Chief Executive, London Borough

About one in five chief executives stressed the importance of strategic planning and transport as issues where they would like a greater say.

'Transport and regional transport policy.'

Chief Executive, Unitary Council

'The regional spatial plan and council tax capping.'
Chief Executive, County Council

The final theme shared by some of the chief executives was desire for greater freedom and less regulation by central government.

'Particularly the way central government micro-manages local government and does not listen to us. We would like greater autonomy.'
Chief Executive,

Metropolitan Council

The most important issues for greater influence with central government amongst leaders were housing and local government finances. In our small sample of leaders, if anything, there was an even greater spontaneously focus on financial constraints and housing than chief executives.

'Money is very limited and adult social care is under pressure. It's not just about more money but also finding smarter ways to do things.'
Leader, County Council

'More with less. Better, more robust partnership.'
Leader, District Council

'The growth agenda and transport.'
Leader, Metropolitan Council

'Housing is a key area where we would like to have more influence.'
Leader, London Borough

Interesting, not all the head of communications, thought there was a requirement for greater influence with central government. However, those that did, tended to focus on housing rather than overall finances.

'Population. Strategic planning. Housing.'
Senior communicator, London Borough

'Housing.'
Senior communicator, Unitary Council

Lobbying

None of the respondents to this survey said that they felt their council was doing too much lobbying of central government. The majority of chief executives and leaders interviewed said that they did about the right amount of central government lobbying. However, about four in ten said they did not feel they were doing enough. Interestingly, heads of communication were even more likely to say that councils were doing enough to lobby central government.

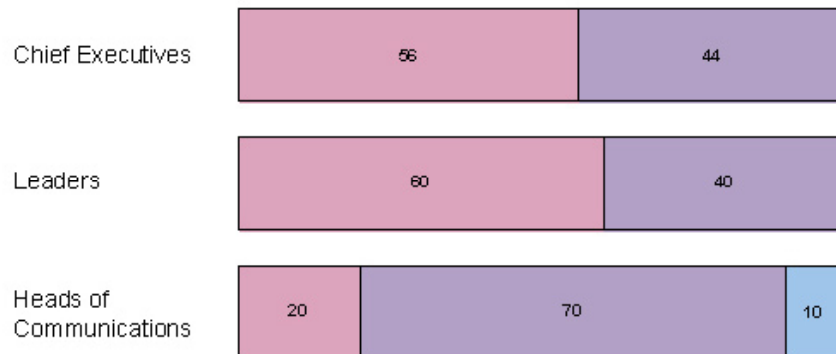
There was also a perception that councils could be working more collaboratively on lobbying and campaigning.

'We don't do enough together.'
Chief executive, Unitary Council

Lobbying

Q In terms of lobbying central government, do you feel your council does...?

% Too much
 % About the right amount
 % Too little
 % Don't Know



Base: 50 chief executives, 10 leaders, 10 heads of communication

Source: TRU

Campaigning Effectiveness

There is considerable campaigning by local government with central government. Almost nine in ten (88%) chief executives said that their council had been involved in some kind of campaign to influence central government in the last year.

About a quarter of these campaigning councils identified grant settlement and fair funding as areas they were campaigning about. The other campaign areas identified by chief executives were unitary status, the growth agenda, concessionary fares and large, local regeneration projects.

Across the board, all respondents tended to judge effectiveness in terms of winning concessions or changing policy. Two-thirds of chief executives said that their campaigning had been effective. Interestingly, though a small sample, leaders tended to be less positive about the effectiveness of their council's campaigning influencing central government.

Campaigning effectiveness of public bodies

Chief executives, leaders and heads of communications were generally positive about the performance of local government organisations like the LGA in influencing central government. Feeding in their views through LGA consultations is a key plank for councils wishing to influence policy.

'Despite political differences, I think they have had a positive influence.'

Leader, London Borough

'I think the LGA have made a bit of a breakthrough with central government.'

Leader, District Council

However, it can be a challenge for national bodies to campaign on issues which affect different parts of the local government community differently.

'While the LGA can be good on national policy sometimes they find it hard to reflect diversity of place and context.'

Chief Executive, County Council

'The LGA are good at raising issues but not progressing them.'

Chief Executive, Metropolitan Council

'It varies so much on some things I think the LGA are spot on, on others very wide of the mark.'

Head of Communications, London Borough

Campaigning effectiveness of public bodies

Q How effective are the local government organisations like the LG A and Solace at influencing central government on your behalf?



Base: 50 chief executives, 10 leaders, 10 heads of communication

Source: TRU

Barriers to public affairs

About nine in ten chief executives say that there are barriers to conducting more public affairs or lobbying campaigns. The major barriers are the 'capacity and resources' to undertake a public affairs campaign allied with concerns about cost. These concerns are shared throughout local government and are expressed by almost every district council in the research.

'Don't really do this sort of thing. It costs too much money and we don't have the expertise to do it.'

Chief Executive, District Council

'Don't have the resources and other things take priority.'

Chief Executive, County Council

There are also significant concerns around whether monies spent on public affairs will be rewarded with positive outcomes for the council.

'Value for money is a key issue. I'm unsure of its effectiveness and not sure we will get the outcomes we want.'

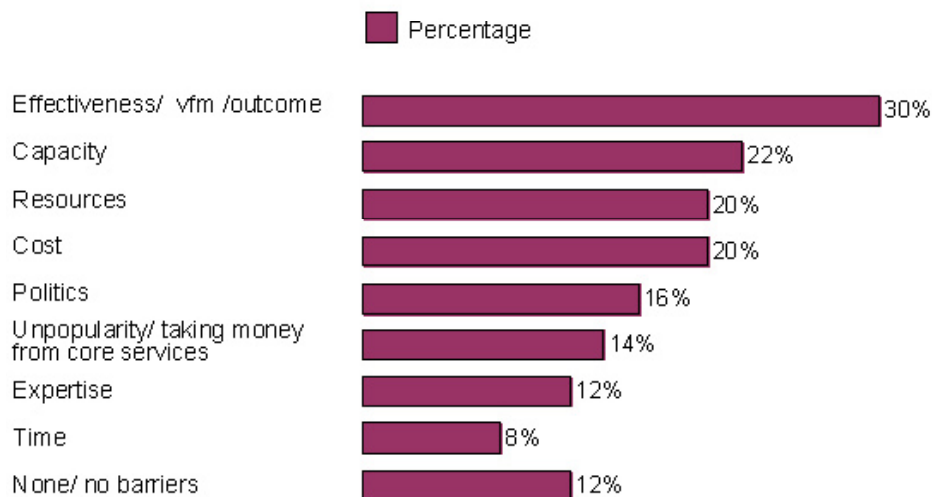
Chief Executive, London Borough

'Cost versus outcome, very few campaigns have delivered the right outcome.'

Chief Executive, Unitary Council

Barriers to Public Affairs

Q What are the main barriers to your council conducting more public affairs/ lobbying campaigns ...? [Spontaneous multi-response]



Base: 50 chief executives

Source: TRU

The third major barrier concerns politics and popularity. Politics has the power to discourage lobbying and campaigning on all sides.

'It could be unpopular for us to lobby central government... it could damage our reputation.'
Chief Executive, Metropolitan Council

'We are a different political persuasion to central government so I think that's major barrier to them listening to us.'
Chief Executive, County Council

As well as national politics, chief executives also said that lobbying campaigns can be perceived as taking money away from core services at a time of falling grant settlement.

'Perceptions of the public about how we spend money, especially as there is not enough money to run basic services.'
Chief Executive, District Council

'Political and public wariness of lobbying rather than services.'
Chief Executive, County Council

Though a small sample, by comparison, leaders tended to be more optimistic about campaigning than chief executives.

'There are no barriers. We lobby on what we need to do.'
Leader, County Council

'We could always do more.'
Leader, Metropolitan Council

The challenges seen by leaders are that they simply do not have the resources to fund a campaign and the political dimension.

'Political differences. I have an innate scepticism of central government.'
Leader, County Council

'I haven't got any issues with central government policy.'
Leader, Metropolitan Council

'The cost... the chances of succeeding.'
Leader, District Council

Heads of communications are more likely to point to the lack of resources to undertake a lobbying campaign.

'Resources and often resistance in service concerned about how they will be perceived by their peers for challenging central government.'
Head of Communications, London Borough

Effectiveness of public affair professionals

Less than half the chief executives we interviewed had used public affairs professionals. It was clear from these discussions that chief executives, to a greater extent, judged the effectiveness of public affairs professionals on the basis of outcome. Two-thirds of chief executives who have used professional lobbyists have found them effective. Though a small sample, this finding does indicate that where councils have used lobbyists the results tend to be positive most of the time. Significantly, much fewer leaders and heads of communications had experience of working with lobbyists.

'The picture is very mixed. Some good, some bad.'
Chief Executive, Metropolitan Council

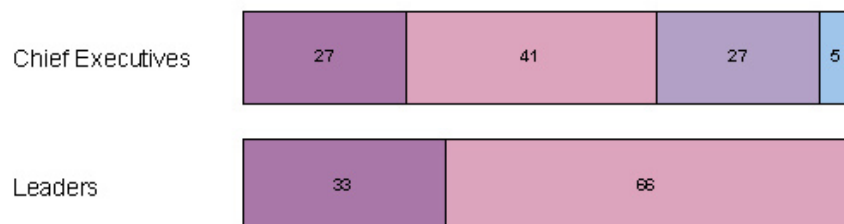
'I have got to see tangible benefit.'
Chief Executive, County Council

'My view of lobbyists' effectiveness is in terms of cause and effect.'
Chief Executive, Unitary Council

Effectiveness of campaigning professionals

Q How effective have you found external public affairs or lobbying support companies?

% Very effective
 % Fairly effective
 % Not very effective
 % Not effective at all



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