

**Committee on Standards in Public Life**

**Room G07**

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Chris Bryant MP

Chair, Committee on Standards

House of Commons

London

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*Sent by email:* standards@parliament.uk

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Dear Chris,

Thank you for inviting CSPL to contribute to your review into All-Party Parliamentary Groups. It is important that the Standards Committee keeps a close eye on the status and governance of APPGs, to ensure that they uphold, and do not undermine, the Seven Principles of Public Life.

Concerns about APPGs are not new, and my Committee looked at them closely in our lobbying report of 2013, just prior to the significant reforms of 2014. We noted then the potential vulnerabilities of APPGs to manipulation by private interests, and established three important principles that should govern lobbying in Parliament more generally: transparency, accountability, and equality of access. These principles remain relevant today and should guide the Standards Committee's analysis of the operation of APPGs in Parliament. I outline how I believe these principles should apply to APPGs below.

Transparency must be at the forefront of APPG governance. APPGs come with the badge of parliamentary branding, and it is therefore likely that members of the public would assume that APPGs’ activity is led solely by their MPs. However, APPGs are often funded and staffed by external organisations, leaving them vulnerable to the accusation that they provide official 'cover' for private sector interests. The answer to this accusation is transparency in two forms. First, APPGs should declare upfront, both online and in any publications, where they receive third party support and any potential external influence on their work. Second, APPGs, and the House management more generally, should be proactive in educating the public about the status, operation and regulation of APPGs. A mismatch between the public's understanding of APPGs and the reality of their operation risks undermining trust in the House.

Parliamentarians must ultimately be accountable for the APPGs they lead. It would not be appropriate for accountability for a parliamentary organisation to reside in a third party organisation outside the House. An MP or Peer should have final responsibility for ensuring APPGs comply with any rules, regulations, and governance arrangements laid down by the House, and for any relevant declaration of interests. Accountability should not be confused or blurred between an MP and a third party organisation providing funding or secretarial support.

The use of third party organisations to fund and staff APPGs also raises issues about equality of access. Lobbying, in general, is beneficial to a democracy. MPs should be able to draw on the expertise and advice of representative groups and third sector organisations with specialisms in certain policy areas. However, problems arise when access to parliamentarians is determined by financial resources, privileging some interest groups at the expense of others. The concern regarding third party involvement in the running of APPGs is that better funded and better staffed APPGs will be able to dominate policy debate, excluding others who may not have the luxury of private sector resources. Involvement in APPGs must not operate on a 'pay to play' basis, where those who provide financial and/or secretarial support gain privileged access at the exclusion of others.

This principled approach to the regulation of APPGs will serve to uphold public trust and ensure that the highest standards of public life are maintained in Parliament.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions.

Yours sincerely,



Lord Evans of Weardale KCB DL

Chair, Committee on Standards in Public Life

*Declarations of Interest:*

*Lord Evans is a member of the Freedom of Religious Belief APPG.*

*Margaret Beckket MP is (ex-officio) Honorary Vice President of the BGIPU, which works closely with APPGs.*

*Jeremy Wright MP is the Chair of the APPG on Digital Regulation and Responsibility.*

*Lord Stunell is an officer for the APPG on Infrastructure, the APPG Archaeology Group, the APPG against antisemitism, and the APPG for Dark Skies.*