

Identifying issues

Introduction

Issues on which a BMO wishes to take action can arise in a host of ways. Often the first that an association knows about an issue is when a member draws it to their attention. BMOs, however, unless they are extremely well resourced, cannot address every issue, so it is necessary to be pro-active in seeking potential issues and then rigorous in prioritising which ones to take on.

Looking for issues

Members' issues

Association members may raise a particular issue because they want help and support to address it, though some members will identify issues specific to them, which the BMO may feel appropriate to address as part of its services, but are unlikely to lead to proposals for change in public policy.

A good way to identify issues is to ask members – informally, say when they come to meetings, and formally, say through regular surveys.

Communicating with members and issue identification are closely linked. Communication can be relatively low level and informal; it might be more regular but mainly one way – generally providing information to members; or it can be regular and two way – obtaining views and priorities from members. This is often the best way of discovering the issues that are currently exercising the minds of your members, though does not of course identify issues of which they are so far unaware.

You should ensure therefore that as far as possible, you put in place processes to seek members' views such as:

- Informal feedback from talking to members or gathered from members at association meetings;
- Contact from member(s) who have identified an issue and need association support;
- Formal survey of participants at meetings;
- Formal survey of all members and, possibly, non-members working in the same sector.

It is important that BMOs do not simply guess what they think is important to their members, but are able to substantiate the key problem areas.

Other ways to identify issues

Hopefully, when the Government has proposals for new regulations, it will want to consult. Sometimes, the Government may not consult, or may not believe that a proposal has implications for the private sector, but the BMO discovers it anyway, and then consults with its members to determine whether it is likely to be an issue.

You need, in addition, to be proactive in identifying issues that are not yet widely known, so that you can seek feedback from members about whether there really is

an issue and the seriousness of the issue, as well as being able to undertake research and start influencing from an early stage. You should therefore:

- Follow the press and media;
- Build relationships with other trade associations and keep in touch with each other;
- Build relationships with NGOs, civil society organisations and research institutions that may be able to tip you off about proposals for new regulation;
- Monitor the activities of key public sector organisations;
- Forge relationships and talk regularly with relevant Ministries, Departments and Agencies.

Searching for issues is not a one off activity, but something the BMO should be doing regularly. However, it also important to remember that an association will not be able to fight on too many fronts at once, so will need to prioritise.

Setting priorities

There will always be some issues that crop up unexpectedly and which require immediate attention. In general, however, associations should not take on too many issues at the same time. The danger is that none will get the attention that they deserve and all will fail. Issues require effort and resource in undertaking research and in preparing compelling policy proposals, not to mention the effort required to meet with and influence public officials and politicians. So take time to

- Research the issues that are important to members, and to businesses in the sector who are not members;
- Research the scale of impact of the issues (that is, how many businesses are affected);
- Research the depth of impact of the issues (that is, the financial impact on businesses).

Then you can prioritise based on the likely impact (for a new regulation) or the current impact (for an existing regulation). BMOs are known to prioritise issues to reflect the views of a small number of members, or according to staff preferences. It is better to take into account the preferences of most members in the association and better still, if possible, to consider the preferences of businesses in the sector, irrespective of whether they are members. Indeed, this might be a way of you promoting yourself to potential members.

It is sensible also to take into account which issues are most timely for the Government – if they are considering a new regulation, they will be more interested in your views on that than on an existing issue which could wait.

If you are new to advocacy, pick issues that you regard as easier first. This will provide an opportunity to learn about dialogue and advocacy. As you gain experience – and confidence – then you can begin to tackle the bigger, more complex issues.