



**World
Physiotherapy**
Europe region

**Briefing Paper -
Public Affairs Strategy for
Physiotherapy Associations in the
Europe Region**

Advocacy & EU Matters Working Group (A&EUMWG)

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**BRIEFING PAPER - PUBLIC AFFAIRS STRATEGY FOR PHYSIOTHERAPY ASSOCIATIONS IN THE
EUROPE REGION**

Europe Region

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SUMMARY

Lobbying and public affairs are no longer marginal activities but a core function of any physiotherapy association aiming to shape health systems. As the political landscape evolves, associations that master stakeholder engagement, message precision, and timing will gain a strategic advantage. Investing in lobbying capacity, nurturing political networks, and aligning advocacy goals with societal needs are essential steps toward greater visibility and influence. Ethical, transparent, and professional lobbying aligned with OECD standards can strengthen democratic processes and public trust.

1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly complex and competitive regulatory and health policy environment, physiotherapy associations must play a proactive role in shaping public decisions. Public affairs – encompassing lobbying, advocacy, and strategic communication – offer an indispensable toolkit to amplify the voice of the profession, safeguard its interests, and foster system-wide change.

Developing a public affairs strategy for a physiotherapy association involves planning and implementing actions aimed at influencing public policy and government decisions in favour of the association's purpose. This approach requires a meticulous understanding of decision-making processes, stakeholder relations and effective communication. This is a strategic investment with a lasting impact. Associations that have a good command of public affairs could:

- Make their voice heard by decision-makers.
- Obtain funding and political support.
- Anticipate reforms and adapt their strategy.
- Mobilise allies to strengthen their advocacy.

In short, public affairs are not an option but a necessity for all Europe Region Member Organisations that really want to make a difference on a large scale.

All public affairs activities must be grounded in the principles of transparency, integrity, and accountability, in line with [OECD guidelines](#) governing interactions between governments and lobbying or influence actors in democratic systems.

This briefing paper, established by the Advocacy & EU Matters Working Group of the Europe Region, defines the concept of public affairs, the prerequisites and explains the role that physiotherapy associations can play in the political arena. It also provides basic recommendations of actions to increase the chances of success of political projects, to be adapted according to national contexts.

2. PUBLIC AFFAIRS STRATEGY FOR PHYSIOTHERAPY ASSOCIATIONS

2.1. What do economists say about lobbying?

In an ideal world, political systems would allocate limited economic resources efficiently and equitably, without generating social tensions. However, it takes little expertise to recognise that this is rarely the case. Political dynamics are deeply embedded in the functioning of any society, shaped by unique historical and cultural contexts.

Economists recognise that lobbying is a democratic necessity, but that it must be regulated to avoid abuse. Each association may refer to the OECD guidelines to ensure ethical and transparent lobbying practices.

2.2. Why should physiotherapy associations invest in public affairs?

On the international level, the overwhelming majority of health economists have concluded that an efficient and equitable organisation of health systems cannot predominantly rely on private markets, and that strong regulatory intervention by the public authority is indispensable. As physiotherapy is generally considered part of public health in many countries and is therefore subject to a certain degree of state regulation, political issues are ever-present for our profession. That is why national or regional physiotherapy associations should develop public affairs strategies.

The objective is to provoke, improve, delay or prevent political decisions at the level of the Constitution, laws or decrees and policies.

Key Tasks:

- Shape media narratives through strategic framing and agenda-setting.
- Seize political opportunities by recognising windows of influence.
- Mitigate risks and protect interests by defending the status quo.
- Spark meaningful change by provoking public debate.

Key Instruments:

- Build and sustain a strong, strategic network.
- Monitor political developments systematically to stay ahead.
- Draft positions and messaging proactively.
- Tailor communication strategies to each stakeholder and phase.
- Deliver messages directly to key decision-makers through timely, targeted lobbying.
- As a last resort, mobilise public support through organised campaigns.

2.3. The role of physiotherapy associations in the political arena

To conduct effective and coordinated advocacy, physiotherapy associations should develop a strategic plan with realistic, context-specific objectives. Success depends on:

- A clear strategy
- Adequate resources
- Strong project management

It's not enough to simply draft a position paper and expect it to be adopted. Advocacy requires active engagement:

- Build relationships with key decision-makers.
- Understand their priorities and political dynamics.
- Offer tailored, actionable solutions.

3. IMPLEMENTING POLITICAL INFLUENCE

To have any political influence, it is necessary to **assume the role of an interest group**. For a physiotherapy association, this is not a given. It requires a desire to actively position oneself in the political debate. To act as a lobbyist, it is necessary to understand these concepts:

Interests/objectives: Lobbyists want to influence the political decision-making process, its outcomes (changes in legislation) and the implementation of those outcomes (enforcement of decisions and decrees).

Actors: Behind these objectives lie interest groups or stakeholders. These are generally politicians, civil servants, representatives of professional interests such as associations, trade unions, private companies, public companies and NGOs.

Target audience: Representatives of state bodies (mainly legislative and executive: parliament, government and administration), other political decision-makers (especially the electorate).

Means: Influence is exerted through direct communication, such as personal contacts or written communications to the targets of lobbying.

Timing: Lobbying is carried out at all stages of the legislative process, from the initiative phase to the drafting of proposals and their deliberation in parliament.

3.1. Why is public affairs work so demanding?

One of the key challenges in public affairs is adapting communication to diverse audiences. The way you engage with the public must differ significantly from how you interact with policymakers or administrative experts.

- For the public, complex data often needs to be simplified and framed in relatable terms to inform, engage, and persuade effectively.
- For policymakers, especially during legislative processes, it's essential to translate ideas into precise legal language and propose coherent, actionable amendments.

This dual demand, **simplifying complexity** for broad audiences **while maintaining technical precision for experts**, is what makes public affairs both challenging and impactful.

3.2. Two-way communication with decision-makers and media presence

Effective public affairs work ensures that the right message reaches the right person, in the right format, at the right time, ultimately influencing political processes in the desired direction. Achieving this requires a clear strategy and adequate resources, enabling the integration of **lobbying efforts with media outreach**.

Lobbying is more than delivering a message. It is about engaging in **two-way communication with decision-makers**. This includes:

- Gaining insights into political dynamics and institutional processes.
- Understanding the interests and constraints of key stakeholders.
- Building trust and credibility over time.

To be truly effective, lobbying must be closely aligned with media relations. Decision-makers, like the public, are influenced by media narratives and current events. A strong **media presence** helps shape public discourse and, by extension, political agendas. Ideally, this presence should influence journalistic framing and agenda-setting.

Timing and audience targeting are critical. Both lobbying and media strategies must be tailored to the political calendar and the specific stakeholders involved.

For a physiotherapy association to lobby effectively, it must meet several key conditions. Lobbying activities can be divided into three levels:

1. Monitoring

The first task of an interest group is to actively observe the environment. Monitoring serves primarily to detect current developments early and to capture relevant political issues.

Much of the time spent on lobbying is devoted to continuously observing the development of relevant issues and their environment. Flexibility is necessary to respond quickly to new developments. **Monitoring is not only influenced by an association's strategy but also contributes to the formulation of the strategy.** The results and experiences of monitoring and the development of an association's strategy should influence each other (feedback loop). **Monitoring therefore also includes tracking and evaluating the initiatives that have been implemented.**

Requirements for monitoring

- Monitoring must be broad enough to capture all relevant cases (including cross-cutting cases).
- Monitoring must be narrow enough to capture only relevant cases.
- Monitoring must allow cases to be grouped according to their own characteristics and observed prospectively (dates) and retrospectively (events).

2. Evaluation and analysis

Secondly, an interest group must analyse and evaluate all relevant information. It decides which political issues it wishes to address and in what order of priority. For each prioritised issue, an action strategy is determined. The choice of action strategy can be determined, for example, using a portfolio analysis. Topics of interest to the group are ranked according to their importance to the organisation and the organisation's ability to influence them. The influence and therefore the chances of success of an organisation depend on various factors.

Influence checklist:

- Do we have lobbying capabilities available?
- What is the nature of the proposal?
- At what stage of the political decision-making process are we?
- Do we have a network of useful contacts?
- Are our positions aligned with the overarching principles of political and public service doctrine?
- What is public opinion on the subject?
- How are competing interest groups behaving?
- How are supporting interest groups behaving?

3. Lobbying in the strict sense

It is only in the third stage that an interest group attempts, if necessary, to influence the collective decision-making process. In the public's eyes, this last point is mainly perceived as lobbying. However, it is not possible without the work done at the previous levels.

3.3. Information as a currency

As mentioned above, political influence requires not only providing information but also gathering it. Each actor must have an interest in exchanging this information. Only conscientious work based on credibility allows one to be a stakeholder in collective decision-making.

Power of information: Through their involvement in their field, interest groups acquire expertise that makes them indispensable to the state in assessing and resolving certain issues. To be **accepted** and **credible** as a long-term expert, the group must provide accurate, useful and reliable information.

Representativeness: An institution must be sufficiently representative to be recognised by exchange partners as the ‘competent’ representative of that group. A high degree of organisation is desirable.

Capacity for conflict: The ability of an interest group to collectively refuse services or threaten to do so in a credible manner.

Economic performance: The financial strength of an interest group creates advantages in promoting its ideas, supporting parties and candidates, and obtaining, processing and disseminating information.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS OF ACTIONS

To operationalise the strategy presented in this briefing paper, we recommend the following actions:

1. Build a dedicated public affairs team

Establish a small but skilled task force within the association to oversee advocacy and lobbying efforts. This team should coordinate messaging, ensure ethical standards, and maintain strategic focus.

2. Develop a tailored lobbying plan

Each national context differs. Physiotherapy associations should map their political ecosystem and tailor a lobbying plan with SMART objectives, clear stakeholder targets, and a timeline.

3. Invest in training and capacity building

Ensure board members and key staff receive regular training on advocacy, regulatory processes, and communication strategies. Peer-learning with other health professions can also be beneficial.

4. Engage decision-makers early and consistently

Effective lobbying starts before legislation is drafted. Physiotherapy associations must cultivate long-term relationships with relevant ministries, parliamentarians, and public officials.

5. Ensure transparency, integrity and accountability

Apply OECD guidelines for ethical lobbying, including disclosure of positions, funding sources, and interactions. This enhances credibility and trust.

6. Strengthen public communication

Use media strategically to frame issues in terms that resonate with the public and policymakers. Align messages with societal priorities such as prevention, system sustainability, and workforce challenges.

7. Monitor political developments

Use legislative monitoring tools and stay informed about political agendas. Be ready to react to political windows of opportunity

8. Collaborate with allies

Forge alliances with other health professions, patient organisations, and research institutions to present united fronts on key issues. Collective action increases leverage.

Motto to remember:

***“One profession – one voice”
“Every physiotherapist should be a lobbyist”***

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GLOSSARY

Association strategy: An association strategy is a detailed plan that guides the actions and decisions of an association to achieve its long-term objectives. The key elements of an association strategy are as follows:

Purpose, vision and value

Clearly articulate the association's purpose (its core aim), long-term vision (its aspirational goals), and the values that guide its actions and decisions.

Strategic objectives

Establish specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (SMART) objectives to guide the association's actions.

SWOT analysis

Conduct strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis to understand the internal and external context.

Action plan

Develop a detailed action plan with concrete steps to achieve the strategic objectives.

Resources

Identify the resources needed (financial, human, material) to implement the strategy.

Evaluation and monitoring

Put mechanisms in place to regularly evaluate progress and adjust the strategy according to the results obtained. A well-defined strategy allows the association to stay focused on its objectives, optimise its resources and maximise its impact.

Advocacy

A broader concept that includes raising awareness, educating the public, and promoting a cause to bring about social or political change, which may or may not involve direct engagement with policymakers.

Public affairs strategy

A public affairs strategy is a plan that describes the goals, objectives, tactics and evaluation methods for interacting with relevant audiences and influencing public opinion or decision-making. The public affairs strategy focuses on political influence and must be part of the association's strategy.

Interest groups

Interest groups exert influence in political markets. To be effective and credible, an interest group must ensure that it addresses the public and political spheres in a uniform manner.

Lobbying

The term has negative connotations, so interest groups do not appear under this term. Common terms for lobbying are, for example, **political communication** and **political advice**. It is a means of achieving the goals set out in the public affairs strategy. It involves direct communication with political decision-makers to influence them.