

## *Campaigning guidance*

*The voluntary sector is regulated in their campaigning activity by the Charity Commission, and campaigning around the General Election is no exception.*

*Here we look at some of the advice that Charity Commission gives on the do's & don'ts of political campaigning....*

The last 10 years has seen major changes in the way charities campaign on policy issues and the context in which they do so. The government now wants to encourage an advocacy and campaigning role rather than restrict it.

An organisation specifically set up to advocate or oppose a change in the law or policy cannot be a charity, because the Charity Commission can't judge whether its political aims are in the public interest. However a charity can pursue its established charitable aims by political campaigning.

When deciding whether to campaign charities must be sure that they are furthering their stated purposes, and that they weigh the possible benefits against the possible risks as well as complying with the general law.

Charities are free to use whatever method they consider appropriate to communicate their message. They can be wholly campaigning bodies, which includes public awareness raising and education. However they must ensure that their 'political activities' don't become the dominant means by which they pursue their charitable aims.

Remember though that you have to balance risk, not avoid it all together. A well-managed campaign can enhance a charity's work and impact but you must consider how actions will or might be perceived by the public and supporters.

There are some simple common sense rules to guide your activities.

- You should consider your reputation and how you are achieving your objectives.
- You must campaign on issues related to your organisation's objectives.
- You should always seek to maintain your reputation & demonstrate your independence.

But what can you actually do when campaigning in the run up to the election? Again the guide here is common sense, but the Charity Commission does provide some examples.

Here are a few things that you are free to do (and a few pitfalls to avoid):

- Any campaign is free to use emotive content in its publicity, however, must consider risk of controversy and potential bad publicity
- You are free to organise demonstrations and direct action, that can simply be distributing leaflets or you can be involved in or organise demonstrations,

marches, peaceful pickets but you always have to weigh doing so against the likely impact on your good reputation.

- Remember that, if you want to be involved in an event, it can be quite tricky because it's harder to control and increases risk. You must ensure that any event is under the proper control of the organiser.

When it comes to dealing with the political parties and candidates themselves there are a wide range of things that you can do.

For example you can:

- support a policy proposed by a political party, while stressing your independence (but you cannot support a candidate)
- provide supporters and the public with information on party or candidates stance on relevant issues
- provide supporters and the public with material to send to candidates
- organise petitions (though of course you have to be able to show these are authentic)
- supply briefing materials to politicians
- publish views & articles from politicians (but must consider range & scope of views & whether they might damage your reputation)
- invite politicians to events, though you should always try to get as wide a cross party coverage as possible and you must make sure not that you are not consistently work with just one political party.

The basic rule of thumb is that you must have a clear understanding of how activity will further the interests of your charity and ensure that your methods are well thought through and don't display even inadvertent party political support.

You can get more detailed Charity Commission guidance on the political campaigning can be found in its report *CC9 - Campaigning & Political Activities by Charities*

<http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/publications/cc9.asp>