# APPG on CHARITIES AND VOLUNTEERING

Campaigning with confidence

24 October 2023

## Minutes

### Mary Foy MP (Chair) introduced the three speakers, each of whom was invited to speak for five minutes.

**Suhan Rajkumar, Senior Associate, Bates Wells**

* Charities can campaign in furtherance of their charitable purposes.
* But charities cannot be established for purely political purposes and must never campaign in a party-political way.
* Even though charities cannot have political purposes, they can focus solely on a political campaign for an extended period of time e.g., a 4-year campaign to save a local building.
* Criticism of charities campaigning for politicians and some of the language used by the Charity Commission can make it sound like charities aren’t able to campaign or aren’t allowed to campaign on certain issues.
* For example, Orlando Fraser’s comments that charities should campaign with ‘tolerance and kindness’ and ‘model a different kind of political discourse’.
* Some issues are politicised and people will disagree strongly, but charities can absolutely campaign on such issues if they fall within their charitable purposes.
* However, the Commission have repeatedly defended charities’ right to campaign and address difficult issues, and they are in a difficult position as the manager of third-party complaints against charities campaigning.
* The Commission found no grounds for regulatory action against the National Trust for its report on links to slavery, despite ‘culture war’ context and political pressure.
* Orlando Fraser has come out and said that ‘wokeness' is not a term that has any legal or regulatory meaning.
* Recent comments from Baroness Sewell against charities campaigning have no grounding in the regulatory framework.
* Finally, the election law framework sets out a spending framework which is another potential deterrent to charities because of the administrative burden.
* However, it is important to stress that the law does not stop charities campaigning or saying what they want to say, so long as they do so in a non-party political way.

**Abbie Kirkby, Head of Policy and Public Affairs, Friends, Families & Travellers**

* FFT is a national organisation working with Gypsies, Travellers and Roma people.
* Campaigning is crucial to how we further our charitable purpose and I want to illustrate that with one of our recent campaigns.
* Caravan sites and mobile homes didn’t receive the £400 Energy Bill Support Scheme payment that every household with electricity should have been eligible for.
* These communities are already more at risk of financial and economic exclusion and fuel poverty.
* It is also especially hard to heat these homes and people are less likely to know what support is out there.
* FFT carried out a range of policy and public affairs activity, including meeting with the Energy Department and working with the APPG on Gypsies, Travellers, and Roma.
* 201 different MPs were written to across the country and some of those MPs went on to write to the minister.
* The campaign was a success. 8000 households received that £400, amounting to £3m of support in total.
* But there have been more complex and challenging campaigns. We campaigned against the Police Bill as part of the Police Bill Alliance.
* As a registered charity we did have to think carefully about the language we were using to challenge government, especially as the Bill was part of the election-winning 2019 manifesto.
* We are thinking carefully about our plans for the general election, given that Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities continue to be attacked.

 **Abdi Mohamed, Head of Public Affairs, Scope**

* Scope is a pan-disability charity, supporting people regardless of their disability.
* 1 in 4 people in the UK are disabled, and we aim to put empower those people so their voices are heard in all places of power.
* In the lead up to the general election, I would like to say both to charity campaigners and political campaigners that not enough digital campaigning is accessible.
* Digital campaigning is huge but not enough branding is accessible, not enough social media posts have alt text.
* Our principles for campaigning are local people, local stories, local stats. That combination allows us to engage authoritatively with parliamentary candidates and sitting MPs.
* It is also not enough now to have purely digital campaigns. Many politicians are actively distancing themselves personally from social media, with their accounts run by teams.
* For the general election we will be focused on accessible comms that are respectful and positive.
* It will be a very busy period but that doesn’t mean any of us can let accessibility slip. Remember that 1 in 4 people are disabled, which means 1 in 4 constituents.

**Q&A**

Baroness Pitkeathley asked, ‘How do charities balance the strong desire for change from beneficiaries against the pragmatism and patience required to achieve actual policy changes?’

In response the panel spoke about the importance of setting expectations and taking beneficiaries on a journey. They also stressed that campaigning isn’t just about changing policy: it can also be about making beneficiaries feel supported and less alone, as well as raising awareness with allies.

Rhammel Afflick from the British Youth Council asked, ‘How are other charities keeping their staff and supporters motivated in a challenging political environment?’

The panel spoke about the importance of making time to celebrate as well as campaign, and also the importance of setting realistic milestones. Abbie Kirkby specifically spoke about challenges arising from campaigning staff being from affected communities.

Jean Jackson online asked ‘If you are a membership organisation, on what basis do you decide on what campaigns to run? Do you consult?’

Abdi Mohamed responded that all campaigning work at Scope is co-produced with people from affected communities and mentioned surveys as one method for gathering views. Abbie Kirkby said the campaigning of FFT comes out of its frontline work, but also its national helpline and then targeted outreach as well.

Abi Freshwater online asked, ‘How do we tread the fine line between challenging the governing political party without being party political?’

The panel responded that it is important to tie your campaign to a live policy issue, and to avoid personal attacks and be careful with the language that you are using. They also stressed that if a charity sticks closely to its mission, then it should be okay. Abdi Mohamed gave the example of the Runnymede Trust and its response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report.

Mary Kelly Foy MP then went on to ask, ‘What are the costs of being party political?’

Suhan Rajkumar responded that the cost is mostly reputational. The regulator can open an investigation and this gets media attention. He gave the examples of the RSPB’s tweet calling ministers ‘liars’ and a tweet by Oxfam in 2014/15 on zero-hour contracts.

He also offered the counterview that some charities have benefited from being small ‘p’ political. The RNLI saw donations increase when it became the focus of a political attack.

Abdi Mohamed added that there are costs that are difficult to measure, such as the emotional impact on campaigners when they are targeted on social media.

Donna O’Brien online asked ‘Is it too late to influence party manifestos?’

The panel responded that it was not too late and that the recent reshuffle on the Labour benches has meant there are new people running the shadow teams and they are open to engaging right now.

Lucy Cottrell online asked ‘If on the other side there is also a danger that some charity supporters feel their charities are being hijacked by people with very strong views on issues that are slightly adjacent to the charity’s actual purposes?’

The panel and others in the room responded that for this reason it is very important to make sure you have a robust evidence base for making decisions on what to campaign on and that the decision-making process itself is documented. The British Youth Council, for example, reach over 1 million young people with their surveys which gives them a strong mandate.

Andy Lock from The Coalfields Regeneration Trust asked, ‘What resources are available from NCVO for charities that want to campaign?’

The secretariat responded that NCVO is currently updating its campaigning guidance, but that helpful resources are available from Bates Wells and the Charity Commission.

Baris Varli from Muslim Charities Forum asked ‘What is the situation when campaigning internationally? How do we campaign legitimately against foreign policy?’

Suhan Rajkumar responded that campaigning against the policies of foreign governments counts as political activity within the campaigning law framework.

Finally, the panel and other attendees stressed: that charities absolutely can campaign; that it is important that charities speak with one voice so politicians have less room for manoeuvre; and that accessibility should not be an afterthought when planning and delivering campaigns.