

Case studies for ping pong

27 January 2014

Save Lewisham Hospital

The Save Lewisham Hospital campaign grew from local residents' concerns about proposed changes to provision at Lewisham Hospital, in southeast London. The organisation has a flat structure, with a small steering group, but no employees or formal constitution. Save Lewisham Hospital is a wholly grassroots campaign, run by local people with a shared interest in their local NHS provision.

The campaign has run for just over a year, and during that time its supporters have carried out a large number of actions. These included two demonstrations, each with over 10,000 participants, a legal commission, a 'question time' event, delivery of a petition to Downing Street, a Pensioners' 'Trolley' March, participation in a wider Save our NHS demonstration and the launching of an ultimately successful judicial review against the Health Secretary's decision. These actions were mainly focussed in Lewisham itself, but activity has also been directed across other areas which would have been affected by the proposals and additionally at Westminster where, ultimately, decision-making power lay. A significant range of these activities are likely to fall within the rules and limits for third party spending, as the definition is so wide.

Although there are no formal records or employees, it is estimated by the campaign's Chair, Dr Louise Irvine, that during the course of the campaign so far, around £36,000 has been collected and spent by the campaign.

Save Lewisham Hospital operates across three parliamentary constituencies, but dissecting spending between these constituencies would be impossible - the campaign is focused on the hospital, not on a specific parliamentary constituency. The Save Lewisham Hospital campaign do not believe it would be possible for them to accurately report their constituency activities and spending.

Lord Harries' amendment on the scope of constituency regulation would make the reporting around constituency limits workable for a campaign such as Save Lewisham, as it would confine limits on constituency spending to activities that are deliberately targeted at constituencies, rather than campaigns on local issues which inevitably have a limited effect outside that area but are not focused on electoral issues.

Issue covered: unworkability of constituency regulation.

Stop Climate Chaos

Stop Climate Chaos is the UK's largest coalition dedicated to action on climate change. The coalition spans over 100 organisations with a combined supporter base of more than 11 million. Members range from national charities such as Oxfam, the Salvation Army and the WI to local organisations and networks across the UK. As a coalition they campaign for the Government to take practical action to keep global warming as far below the 2 degrees C danger threshold as possible.

In the lead up to the to the Copenhagen Climate change summit in December 2009, and the UK General Election in May 2010 the organisations in the Stop Climate Chaos coalition worked on a range of events.

These included local hustings events that took place in 50 constituencies. These events had staff from a range of organisations and adhered to strict rules. Each one came to a total cost of around £2280. Additionally, all other material for constituency specific activity – posters to promote the campaign, staff time delivering it, as well as central campaign costs – reports, insight, promotional material for the campaign, would have exceeded the £9,750 constituency limit.

The hustings were also not the only constituency based activity undertaken by Stop Climate Chaos in the lead up to the 2010 election. Other activity included the 'Ask the Climate Questions campaign, a campaign with coalition organisations encouraging their supporters to raise climate action when speaking to MPs, pollsters, local parliamentary candidates, etc.

In addition to the above, further activities were carried out by the coalition on a national basis. These included the Kingsnorth Mili-band, where over 1,000 supporters came together to form a human chain around the Kingsnorth coal power station followed by an outdoor rally and The Wave, a huge march through London that 50,000 supporters attended. The total staff costs involved in setting up all of these activities would have put the Stop Climate Chaos coalition over the proposed spending limits in the Lobbying Bill.

The Commission on Civil Society and Democratic Engagement does not believe the activities described above represent an unreasonable level of activity either at a constituency or national level. However many of these activities would not be possible in the run up to an election under the current Lobbying Bill proposals as many could be caught by the rules. Lord Harries' amendments would remove the background staff costs for these activities, making them possible without exceeding constituency limits and the proposed spending limits.

Issues covered: unworkability of constituency regulation and staff costs in relation to spending limits.

Royal British Legion - 'Time to do your bit'

'Time to do your bit' was a simple pledge campaign in which MPs and, prior to the election, prospective parliamentary candidates were asked to pledge to do their bit for the armed forces. When a politician pledged to do their bit, they received a personalised, credit card-sized pledge card to carry in their wallet and display to voters for whom armed forces welfare was an election issue. The Legion also provided those who pledged with a customisable press release for use in the local media.

Under PPERA, the Legion would not have fallen under regulation because the range of activities and materials covered was far narrower. Under the Lobbying Bill proposals, the inclusion of further activities including press and publicity work means that the personalised pledge card and related publicity work could be seen as intending to promote the cause of a particular candidate.

If staff costs remain in the Bill the Legion would have to register as the costs of the campaign would far exceed the £20k limit, and grapple with the registration and reporting process. As the Royal British Legion said in their evidence to the Commission: "Further regulation only adds to the administrative burden charities have to bear. Even the Legion, a relatively large charity, does not have a dedicated administrative function within its campaigns team."

Not removing staff costs from the Bill would likely have a 'chilling effect' on organisations such as the Legion who undertake pledge campaigns in the run up to an election. The passing of Lord Harries' amendments would remove the possibility of discouraging such activity, which we believe plays a positive role in elections campaigns, does not have an unreasonable effect on election outcomes and simply intends to raise the profile of a particular policy issue.

The amendment to remove certain staff costs does not have any bearing on the situation that some politicians have expressed concern about in which a third party may want to second staff to work for a party or candidate. That is not a situation regulated by third party rules. Such costs would either count towards a party's spending limit, or a candidate's spending limit depending on the timing and nature of the secondment. Ensuring appropriate enforcement, rather than changing third party rules, is the appropriate response to such concerns.

Issues covered: staff costs.