

The vote for change

The public may be left cold by politics but charities are finding increasing support for their campaigning activities. Becky Slack wonders if the increasing volume is being heard in the corridors of power

It's often claimed that the general public is apathetic when it comes to politics. Indeed, only 52 per cent are "absolutely certain" to vote in the forthcoming general election, according to a recent MORI survey.

Despite this, however, over three quarters (77 per cent) in the same poll said they had an interest in national issues, and 81 per cent expressed interest in local issues. This presents a huge opportunity for charities wishing to engage the public's interest, and increasingly people are turning to the sector when they want to make a difference.

Friends of the Earth Scotland is a good example. Recently it has experienced such an increase in the numbers wanting to get involved it deemed it necessary to start a course for volunteers on how to campaign. At Oxfam, meanwhile, the number of supporters taking action has jumped from 30,000 to 200,000 in the last two years (an increase of 567 per cent).

Furthermore, much of the activity is among younger age groups – traditionally held to be among the most politically disenchanted. The growth at Oxfam was largely down to 18-24 year olds getting involved, and at a recent event organised by Advocates for Informed Democracy on development advocacy, held at the London School of Economics, the

auditorium was packed full of young people. More tellingly, when CAF conducted research in February into why people donated to the Tsunami appeal, it discovered that many of the young people who gave (and 86 per cent say they did) said that they felt it was more effective than voting.

To a certain extent, this popularity can be attributed to the rise of technology in campaigning, which chimes well with young people. Thanks to email and SMS technology, mobilising supporters is easier than ever. Oxfam, for example, last year used supporter emails to convince Nestle to stop its £6m claim against Ethiopia. The campaign launched on December 18, 2003, and by January 24, 2004, its Make Trade Fair website had received a 400 per cent surge in activity and Nestle had been bombarded with 80,000 emails. As a result the corporation agreed to settle the argument by reducing its claim to £1.5m, which it agreed to donate back to Ethiopia as famine relief.

But the resurgence of interest is also down to a distinct shift in the political environment as a result of the change of government in 1997. Generally perceived to be more attentive to the sector's voice anyway, the new Labour Government, in its Treasury Cross-Cutting Review of 2002, recommended that the Charity

Commission rewrite its campaigning guidance. The result is a document where the tone is less cautionary – a move that, although it hasn't changed the law, has helped to encourage charities campaigning efforts.

This helped bolster an already growing acceptance that campaigning may be the most effective way for some charities to work towards their objectives – so that, for instance, poverty relief charities are encouraged to push for a change in law to prevent poverty occurring in the first place. Charities are therefore less nervous that they will be accused of wasting money that should have been spent on delivering services.

Indeed, of the four organisations nominated for last year's Most Effective Campaigning Award at the Epolitix Charity Champion awards, three were service delivery charities. The winner was Macmillan Cancer Relief, which says its interest in campaigning was sparked by its role in contributing to the content of the NHS cancer plan. "We had to hold the government to account for the delivery of that plan so had to shift a gear," explains Kevin Shinkwin, Macmillan's parliamentary affairs manager. "This meant moving from being in collaboration with the government to being its 'critical friend'".

Charities have also become

increasingly sophisticated in their campaigning over recent years and, in fact, this may have served to disguise the growing extent of their efforts. So instead of placing emphasis on demonstrations as in the late 70s and 80s, more subtle techniques are often now preferred, and hidden within Westminster are numerous charity parliamentary officers steadily working to bring about change by hosting events, presenting research and talking to the relevant parties and officials.

"One of the trends is that charities are increasingly clear about how civil servants and officials require different tactics to MPs," says NCVO's head of campaigns and communications Chris Stalker. "They also recognise that effective campaigning isn't just about writing letters or parliamentary briefings; it means thinking about the macro and micro environment and political and social economic trends. And while charities can do this themselves, they're also open to enlisting outside help, such as think tanks, to help them understand the conditions they are operating in."

At its most extreme this understanding sees many now mimicking the politicians they are trying to persuade, producing their own manifestos around the time of party conferences and elections. By promising to endorse any candidates who adopt the charity's policy, these documents can give huge leverage when presented by an organisation with a strong reputation.

Cancer Research UK (CRUK) is a prime example. Its document *The Cancer Challenge: Agenda for Change*, published during last October's conference season, was commended by all three parties who took on board many of its suggestions.

But despite its successes, no party has committed to the charity's main priority: a full ban on smoking in public places, and the charity is now enlisting the support of its two million regular donors – an unprecedented move for it. "We've never been a

campaigning charity," says Richard Davidson, director of policy and public affairs. "But we felt we were missing a trick by not mobilising our supporters to put pressure on the government."

But not everyone is that impressed with the sector's achievements. At the Directory of Social Change's Charity Fair on April 12-14, for instance, Fathers4Justice founder and managing director, Matt O'Connor, will argue that charities "kowtow" to the government too much. Meanwhile, Jessica Morris, chair of The Sheila McKechnie Foundation, the charity registered at the end of February with the aim of improving others' campaigning, also argues that charities could do better.

"Charities are not moving with the flow of public opinions and they need to be more creative, more ambitious and harder hitting in the way they mobilise support," says Morris. She believes charities' reluctance to be "radical" is due to the fear of losing funding: a belief supported by Julia Unwin's research for the Acevo publication *Speaking truth to power*, which found a tendency for charities to self-censor for fear of upsetting government. Others are less convinced, though. "It's a fear a lot of people talk about," says Robin Hutchinson, director of Epolitix, "but I've never actually heard it expressed by campaigners."

The uncertainty is probably down to the difficulty of evaluating campaigning work. Many charities count the number of postcards and emails sent to policy makers, how many Early Day Motions were signed and the press coverage they had, but they need to do more – particularly in measuring not just the inputs and outputs but also outcomes. "It's an area that is lacking activity. But just because it's harder to assess than, say, the impact of a fundraising strategy, doesn't mean it shouldn't be done," says NCVO's Stalker. Ultimately, of course, what matters is not what noise charities make but what changes they actually bring about.

Political animals: campaigner profiles

Kevin Shinkwin, parliamentary affairs manager, Macmillan Cancer Relief

Background: Over the past five years Macmillan has repositioned itself to be the government's "critical friend", and for the last two years has been rated most effective campaigner by the Charity Parliamentary Monitor.

Highlight: Macmillan build cancer centres it gives to the NHS. It was liable for VAT on the building costs, but recently persuaded the Treasury that the NHS should pay.

Greatest frustration: "That charities are often pigeon-holed. For instance, we work to get a better deal for those affected by cancer, but the government still sees the charity as solely about end of life care."

Top tip: "Be selfish when you need to be. Coalitions achieve a lot, but we wouldn't have got the VAT agreement as part of a large group. And remember to thank MPs and Peers for their support."

Corinne Evans, parliamentary officer, The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW)

Background: A campaigning organisation since its birth in 1969, IFAW is concerned with animal welfare. Its work includes preventing poaching and protecting national parks.

Highlight: Back in 1983, the charity was instrumental in persuading the EU to ban trade in seal fur. As a result, the Canadian government also decided to make seal poaching illegal.

Greatest frustration: "That animal welfare is sometimes viewed by politicians as being 'frivolous', and that's despite huge public support. The challenge is to make sure that you are taken seriously by those in power."

Top tip: "Make sure all public, media and political work is joined up as it will result in more movement and successes".

Chris Dyson, media and special projects manager, The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association

Background: Moved into campaigning around four years ago after it felt its work was being undermined by society's attitude to the blind.

Highlight: Despite limited experience, it has successfully changed the law on two occasions, including making it illegal for mini cab drivers to refuse guide dogs as passengers.

Greatest frustration: "When high profile media campaigns nevertheless fail to change society's attitude."

Top tip: "Try to be creative and think outside the box in terms of presenting information. Also don't rely too heavily on using celebrities. Although they are important, they can dilute key messages and leave a charity with serious problems if they pull out."

