

**Political neutrality – transcript of audio recording**

Phoebe: Hello, I’m Phoebe, the Learning and Development Manager in the Volunteering Team at the MS Society. Today we’re going to be looking at the issue of how we ensure we’re politically neutral while still having a strong campaigning voice as a charity, both nationally and locally.

To help us, I’d like to introduce Katherine Dickinson, Campaigns Manager.

Katherine: Hello.

Phoebe: And Georgina Carr, External Relations Manager.

Georgina: Hello.

Phoebe: Georgina, could you tell us a little bit about your role?

Georgina: Sure, so as External Relations Manager I oversee all of our lobbying work here in London and particularly in Westminster.

Phoebe: Thank you. And Katherine…

Katherine: Sure, well Georgina and I work really closely together and while Georgina’s role is more about influencing behind the scenes, my role as Campaigns Manager is about how we engage the public, and volunteers and our supporters in campaigning for change.

Phoebe: Thanks both. So, what does political neutrality mean?

Georgina: Before we answer that question, it’s really important to say that we absolutely have a voice that must be heard by politicians and decision-makers and we have the right to make sure that that voice is heard in a number of ways. That being said, as a national charity, we are also obligated by regulations to campaign in a way that isn’t seen to endorse one political viewpoint, or one political party, over another.

Phoebe: OK. I’ve heard about the Lobbying Act, came in a couple of years ago I think. It was referred to as the ‘gagging law’ in most of the things I read. Is that what you’re referring to?

Katherine: Yes and no. There are actually Charity Commission guidelines that we need to follow and adhere that require charities to be independent and politically-neutral. So it’s important that we are mindful of that generally but the Lobbying Act that you’ve just mentioned has tightened the rules around what we can do in the lead up to an election or a referendum.

Phoebe: Right, ok. So there are Charity Commission guidelines around political neutrality that we must always observe but the Lobbying Act is quite specific. So what is it?

Georgina: Exactly, so essentially the Lobbying Act sets rules in how we can go about influencing or campaigning for change in policy in the run up to elections and referendums. And as we all know that can be a particularly politically sensitive time.

Phoebe: That’s a tongue twister

Katherine: It is in these periods of time where we particularly need to consider whether our campaigning could be seen as political and therefore could influence people’s voting choices.

Phoebe: Right. Tell me more about what you mean by ‘influencing people’s voting choices’?

Katherine: Well, there are a range of campaign tactics that the MS Society might use either nationally or locally. So for example that could be media work, or running a public event or putting something up on social media to campaign. And in using these tactics, we could be seen to favour one party over another and therefore influence the way that people choose to vote.

Georgina: So, to give an example of that – if we put in an MS Society Group newsletter in the lead up to an election that we’re delighted that a particular candidate from a particular party in anyone’s constituency has backed our campaign, it could be argued that we’re supporting that party over others. So what we need to do is to show that we’ve given each party an equal opportunity to sign up.

Katherine: Absolutely, so – to avoid that kind of situation - if we were holding a hustings event…

Phoebe: ... which means?

Katherine: A hustings event is a debate with local or national candidates, so people who’re standing to be an MP or Councillor. If we were going to do this before an election, we’d need to make sure candidates from a range of parties were invited. Now it might be that not all of them accept the invitation or not all of them turn up, but the important thing is that we show that we’ve given each party an equal opportunity to attend this hustings event.

Phoebe: Right ok, that’s an event you’re talking about. You mentioned before social media, does the same apply online?

Georgina: So the same principles apply online as they do offline. To give you another example, we recently ran our campaign called “End the Wait” in the run up to the Northern Ireland national election. In it, we asked local candidates to sign a pledge and back the campaign. We then listed all the candidates on our website, but we made sure that we gained support from a range of parties before we publicised who had signed the pledge. That way, it didn’t look like we were favouring one party over another. And positively, we got support from parties across the political spectrum so this wasn’t a problem anyway.

Phoebe: Ok, great. Does every issue we campaign on have to follow political neutrality?

Katherine: Yes, it is something to remember whatever your local campaign issue is.

Phoebe: Ok, thank you. I think that’s clear. But I am sure there are grey areas in some cases, no?

Georgina: Yes, and we’re here to help if anybody has any questions. But the important thing is that this legal guidance shouldn’t make us nervous or limit how we speak out for people with and affected by MS. It’s just about ensuring we’re not seen as favouring one party over another, and that should be pretty easy to do.

Phoebe: Great. So what should volunteers who are campaigning do if they have any questions or concerns?

Katherine: Well as Georgina says, we’re very happy to help people and answer any questions and if people are in any doubt about how to ensure their MS Society campaign is politically neutral, they should contact their Regional External Relations Officer. And their contact details can be found on the campaigning section of the volunteer website. But people are also welcome to email my team, which is the Campaigns team team based at National Centre and you can email campaigns@mssociety.org.uk if you have any questions.

Phoebe: Great. Well, thank you very much both for your time today.

Katherine

and Georgina: Thank you

Phoebe: That’s it from us from for now. Thank you for listening!

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| **Title Political neutrality v1** |
| Content Owners: | Campaigns ManagerExternal Relations Manager |
| Signed off: | October 2016 |
| Review date: | October 2019 |
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