

Factsheet for non-party campaigners: Common campaigning techniques: Party conferences

Under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act (PPERA), there are rules on what non-party campaigners can spend on regulated campaign activity in the run-up to certain elections.

Our guidance explains what campaign activity is regulated and the rules [non-party campaigners may need to follow](#). You should read this guidance before you read this factsheet.

This factsheet explains how to apply the purpose and public tests to activity at political parties' annual conferences.

What is covered by these rules?

The non-party campaigning rules apply to spending on what we call 'regulated campaign activity'.

The following will be 'regulated campaign activity' if they can reasonably be regarded as intended to influence voters to vote for or against political parties or categories of candidates, including political parties or categories of candidates who support or do not support particular policies or issues (we call this the '**purpose test**')

- press conferences or other media events that you organise
- transport in connection with publicising your campaign

As well as meeting the purpose test, spending on the following activities is only regulated if the activities are also aimed at, seen or heard by, or involve the public (we call this the '**public test**'): This applies to:

- the production or publication of election material (such as leaflets, adverts and websites)
- canvassing and market research (including the use of phone banks)
- public rallies and public events

You can find more information on the purpose and public tests in [Overview of regulated non-party campaigning](#).

Party conferences

Non-party campaigners may wish to attend a party conference in order to present their views to politicians and candidates.

To decide whether spending on your planned activities at a party's annual conference is likely to be regulated, you will need to decide whether it meets the purpose and public tests.

Organisations often have conference stands, hold fringe meetings and receptions at party conferences. If any of these activities only involves lobbying or influencing politicians and candidates, they will **not** be regulated.

If you hold a fringe event and reception that is just for politicians and candidates, it will **not** be regulated by us. If members of the public attend, you will then need to consider whether what you are doing at the meeting will meet the purpose test. If you invite the media to attend a fringe meeting or reception, it may become a media event that is regulated by us if it meets the purpose test. If any of your activities are not lobbying or influencing on party policy issues, you will need to consider whether they meet the purpose test.

If you organise fringe events at more than one party conference, you should also decide whether to consider the events separately or together as a series of events. Factors such as the format of the events may be relevant in deciding whether or not they should be considered together as a series of events. If you hold the same event in the same format at all party conferences, this may mean that the series of events is less likely to meet the purpose test.

Example

An umbrella organisation for care providers attends a party's annual

conference to raise the profile of the sector among politicians of the party and represent its members' views on the future of the regulation of care.

The party conference is the last before the upcoming UK Parliamentary general election and falls within the regulated period.

The organisation hosts a fringe reception which is attended by key party representatives, elected members and parliamentary candidates standing at the upcoming election. This takes place within the security cordon of the party conference.

The reception is intended to give members of the organisation the opportunity to discuss with politicians and party policy makers how regulation can support better standards of care, and influence the party's policies in this area.

The organisation also takes a one-page advert in the conference handbook. The advert puts forward several policy ideas that the party should adopt to simplify the complex environment in which care providers operate.

Outside the official conference perimeter, the organisation puts up a billboard to promote the quality care and support the not-for-profit sector provides among conference attendees and other passers-by.

What does this mean for the campaigner?

The campaigner would need to apply the **purpose** and **public** tests in relation to the fringe reception, the advert and campaign banner.

• The fringe event

Spending on the fringe event will be regulated if it passes the public and purpose tests.

The fringe event takes place within the official perimeter which is restricted to conference attendees.

While the event is primarily intended to provide a forum for the organisation and its members to put their concerns directly to politicians and candidates, this is open for anyone attending the conference with an interest in these issues to participate. This activity will therefore be likely to pass the **public test**.

To decide whether the fringe event passes the **purpose** test, you should consider:

Tone

The purpose of the event is to stimulate policy discussions and promote certain policy ideas for the party to adopt, rather than to influence voting choice.

Context and timing

Although this takes place during the regulated period for the upcoming election, the context suggests that the fringe event is aiming to influence the party's policies and what politicians are thinking, rather than voters.

Call to action

The event is aimed at lobbying and influencing politicians. It is not explicitly or implicitly asking voters to vote for particular parties or categories of candidates.

How a reasonable person would see the activity

A reasonable person is not likely to think the fringe event is intended to influence voters vote for a particular party or group of candidates at the election.

As the purpose test is not met, spending on the fringe event would not be regulated.

- **The conference handbook advert**

Spending on the conference handbook advert will be regulated as election material if it meets the purpose and public tests.

The advert is placed in the conference handbook which is made available to all those attending (whether elected members and parliamentary candidates or ordinary party members and supporters), so it will pass the **public** test.

To decide whether the advert passes the **purpose** test, you should consider:

Tone

The policy ideas in the advert are presented in a way that does not appear to be positive or negative towards a particular political party or category of candidates.

Context and timing

As for the fringe event, the timing of the advert coincides with the regulated period, but the context suggests that this is because it is aiming to influence the party and its candidates, not voters.

Call to action

The advert is aimed at the party's decision-makers and individual party members to have their say as part of the party's policy-making process to shape the party's future policies.

If the campaigner was instead focusing on conference participants as voters, asking them either explicitly or implicitly to vote for the particular party or its candidates, spending on the advert would be more likely to be regulated.

How a reasonable person would see the activity

A reasonable person is not likely to think that the advert is intended to influence voters to vote for a particular party or group of candidates at the election.

Based on these factors, the advert would not meet the purpose test and would not be regulated.

- **The campaign billboard**

Spending on the campaign billboard will be regulated as election material if it meets the purpose and public tests.

The campaign billboard is placed outside the official perimeter where it can be seen by those who go into the conference as well as the public at large, so it will meet the **public** test.

To decide whether the advert passes the **purpose** test, you should consider:

Tone

The campaign billboard appears intended to make both politicians and the public at large more widely aware of the services provided by non-for-profit care providers, rather than to influence voters.

Context and timing

The position and placing of the billboard is influenced by the proximity of the party's conference,

but the context suggests it is primarily aimed at building a greater level of support for the sector's role in the delivery of services.

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Call to action

The message on the billboard is about raising awareness of care providers and does not ask voters either implicitly or explicitly to vote for a particular party.

How a reasonable person would see the activity

A reasonable person is not likely to think that the banner is intended to influence voters vote for a particular party or group of candidates at the election.

Based on these factors, the campaign banner would not meet the purpose test and not be regulated.

Where you can find more information

We publish a suite of guidance for non-party campaigners which can be found at

<http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/party-or-campaigner/non-party-campaigners>.

We also offer an advice service and you can contact us on one of the phone numbers or email addresses below. We are here to help, so please get in touch.

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