

The new wave of climate activism

The climate crisis has gone mainstream, with many charities now seeing this as a priority. But the tactics of some campaigners have raised questions for charity leaders about the risks of supporting climate change campaigns.

Mark Abbott looks at how charities can get involved.



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For many years, environmental charities have campaigned tirelessly to build public awareness of the challenges faced by humanity as a result of climate change. But during the past year the civil disobedience campaigns of Extinction Rebellion and the school climate strikes instigated by Greta Thunberg have helped to generate the mainstream public recognition that this existential crisis deserves.

Climate change isn't just a priority for charities with environmental purposes. Trustees of other charities might reasonably believe avoiding climate catastrophe is essential to relieve poverty, protect health, save lives and advance human rights, for example. But charities may be concerned about the extent to which they are able to support organisations and movements whose tactics are rooted in civil disobedience.

Campaigning and political activity

As Jess Collings explains in the article on page 8 of this Update, it's well established that charities can engage in campaigning and political activity, aimed at securing or opposing changes in law or government policy, to further a charitable purpose (such as protecting the environment).

The position is more complicated where a charity wants to support any activity that may be seen as contrary to public policy, or is even unlawful (such as blocking roads, or permitting children to take unauthorised absence from school). These actions can be an intrinsic part of peaceful civil disobedience.

To what extent can charities support civil disobedience?

It is commonly accepted that unlawful activity may well result in reputational or other risks to a charity. Direct support for civil disobedience is particularly likely to be high risk and charities considering this approach would be wise to take advice.

However, there will be various other ways that charities might engage with this

new wave of environmental activism. For example:

- A public expression of support can be very helpful and costs little. Support can be expressed in ways that limit reputational risk to the charity – for example, tweeting about the school protests, Jeremy Corbyn stated that 'it's inspiring to see them making their voice heard today': expressing support for the children's activism while stopping short of being seen to advocate truancy.
- Similarly, charities may decide that publicly declaring or recognising the climate emergency is an effective way to lend support to the movement, with little implication for the charity's resources. They would, of course, need to be able to justify how such an action furthers their charitable purposes.
- If a charity wishes to provide financial support, this could be provided on a restricted basis, to support lawful campaigning activities. Or funds could be provided indirectly – by providing transportation, accommodation or training for activists, for example. In this way, the charity can retain control of the support it is providing and avoid allegations that it has supported more controversial, unlawful activities.
- Some charities are affiliated with other, non-charitable campaigning organisations, which might be willing and able to provide more active support for higher risk activism.

With any of these actions, trustees will need to consider the potential reputational implications of being associated with campaigns that involve civil disobedience. But trustees of environmental charities may naturally be equally concerned by the reputational risks of failing to engage with grassroots movements that have captured the public imagination.