

Guidelines for Charities in Aotearoa New Zealand: Political Advocacy and Engagement

He waka eke noa – We're all in this together.

As charities, we are often close to the heartbeat of our communities. We see the challenges, carry the aspirations, and work every day to build a more equitable Aotearoa. Naturally, this means many of us want to be part of the conversations that shape policies and decisions—especially during election time.

At the Len Reynolds Trust, we believe in the power of advocacy. We also believe in doing it the right way.

Whether you're educating about Māori wards, promoting mental health policies, or encouraging voter turnout, it's important to stay within the boundaries of the law to protect your charitable status. This guide helps clarify what you can and can't do as a registered charity during election periods—and beyond.

1. Charities and the Law: Know the Framework

Charities in Aotearoa must operate within both the Charities Act 2005 and the Electoral Act 1993.

- Your organisation must be primarily focused on charitable purposes such as advancing education, supporting wellbeing, or benefitting the community.
- Political advocacy is permitted, but only when it clearly supports your charitable goals.
- You cannot become political in a partisan sense—that is, you must not support or oppose political parties or candidates.

What's at Risk?

If your charity endorses a political party or candidate, or uses its resources for political campaigning, you could face:

- Investigation by Charities Services
- Removal from the Charities Register
- Loss of tax-exempt status
- Reputational damage

Put simply, if your charity is seen as behaving more like a political organisation than a community one, you may no longer be seen as operating for the public good.

2. What Charities CAN Do

We're glad to say the list of things you *can* do is long—and powerful.

Advocate for issues that align with your purpose:

- Raise awareness about housing, climate, inequality, education, mental health, or any issue connected to your kaupapa.
- Make submissions, publish research, and engage decision-makers.
- Educate the community about the importance of Māori wards and Te Tiriti-based governance.

Encourage democratic participation:

- Run non-partisan events to promote voting.
- Host candidate forums—just make sure to invite *all* candidates.
- Share how-to-vote information (not who to vote for).
- Support staff or volunteers to be politically active *as individuals*, not representatives of your organisation.

3. What Charities *CANNOT* Do

Here's where things get risky.

No endorsements

- Don't say or imply support for a party or candidate—online or offline.
- Don't use language like "Vote for candidates who support X." Instead, say "Here's why X matters for our community."

No donations or political advertising

- You can't fund campaign materials, run ads, or donate to campaigns—even if the candidate supports your cause.

No partisan use of resources

- Charity staff time, premises, social media accounts, or funds must never be used for electioneering.

No election advertising without disclosure

- If you're promoting a policy during an election, your material might count as election advertising—and that comes with strict rules.
- When in doubt, check with the Electoral Commission.

4. Tips for Staying Safe and Strong

- Create a political engagement policy: Make sure your team knows the rules.
- Frame all advocacy through your charitable purpose: Stay focused on your mission.
- Be transparent: Present balanced information.
- Seek guidance: Contact Charities Services or the Electoral Commission if you're unsure.

5. Real-Life Examples

Great Practice:

- A charity working in youth wellbeing runs a campaign on the need for better mental health services, without linking it to any candidate.
- A hapū-led organisation hosts a candidate forum and asks all speakers about their views on Te Tiriti.

Not Okay:

- A charity posts on social media: “Support candidates who care about climate justice—vote [Party Name].”
- A group rents out their premises to only one political party for campaigning.
- A charity funds or promotes an ad urging people to vote for a specific party’s policy during the election period.

Final Thoughts

Charities have an essential role to play in shaping Aotearoa. When we advocate responsibly and lawfully, we help build a stronger democracy—one where communities are informed, engaged, and heard.

Let’s continue to uplift voices, challenge injustice, and champion participation—while protecting the integrity of our mahi and the trust of those we serve.

Helpful Links and Legislation

- [Charities Services – www.charities.govt.nz](http://www.charities.govt.nz)
- [Electoral Commission – www.elections.nz](http://www.elections.nz)
- Charities Act 2005
- Electoral Act 1993 – Election Advertising Rules