

Briefing Notes

‘Considerations for boards when campaigning’

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In partnership with



PlaceShapers

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Introduction

In this session, Anne McLoughlin, the Chair of Homeless Link, experienced NED and Trustee at the Refugee Council, shared her thoughts on campaigning and the considerations as a board member in the housing sector. Examples of issues that housing associations could be campaigning about included mental health and general wellbeing, cost of living and the stigmatisation of social housing.

Anne discussed what issues the sector should be campaigning for and how to bring your own insight and experience into a campaign.

Regulatory – reasons for why you should not campaign

Anne’s presentation touched on directors’ duties under the Companies Act 2006, acting in the best interests of the organisation and conflicts of interests. Anne considered these duties worried board members as potential ‘bear traps’ when considering whether to campaign on an issue.

In relation to the regulatory standards applying to housing associations, the requirement to safeguard taxpayers’ interest and the reputation in the sector was a specific issue of concern when considering campaigning and can act as a deterrent. However, nobody present could recall regulatory action being taken by the RSH because of active campaigning. Anne therefore suggested this was highly unlikely and these deterrents were not obstacles.

Why we should campaign – a short story

Anne acknowledged there were material and relevant social justice issues that needed campaigning on. Anne's experience as Chair of Innisfree Housing Association related to when a young migrant child was washed up on a beach in September 2015 and Innisfree used this as part of their campaign to return to their Irish roots and to support minority communities and migrants.

Many people were concerned about the hostile environment and growing trends of boats coming across the channel but Anne chaired a group of minority ethnic associations and campaigned for an antidote to the hostile environment. From this, the 'Housing Association pledge to migrant people' was created. This got a huge amount of support and was launched in 2017 with three leading housing associations, one key pledge and a further 32 housing associations joined as members. In addition, there was national endorsement from the National Housing Federation.

Anne also spoke to housing associations and wanted to make sure they were aware of people's rights and highlighted the need to make sure they did not have unduly discriminatory policies against migrants. However, even with all this, Anne did not feel it was enough. Anne finished as chair in 2019 and then the direction changed.

Anne compared this with a campaign she thought worked well with Hightown HA. They took up campaigning following the 50th anniversary of the 'Cathy Come Home' film and created 'Homes for Cathy'. Anne reflected on how much of a difference this made. It was launched in 2016 by 4 lead housing associations with nine commitments and recruited members with 1.34m social housing homes. This really raised the profile for homelessness. Anne summarised by stating campaigning can have such a powerful influence and it is well worth doing even though individuals are concerned about the regulatory constraints (which are far from constraints!).

The keys to success

Anne identified five keys to success: (1) the drive of a leading CEO with full support from the Board; (2) a defined strategy with measurable outcomes; (3) funded administration; (4) lasting strategy partnerships and (5) aligned to the social mission of the organisation.

Q&A Session

Some of the main themes from the Q&A session were:

What do we need to think about as board members when campaigning? Are there areas that need to be explored further?

- There was concern that the sector is currently going through massive change and customers are facing dramatic pressures and lifestyle changes. There needs to be a sense of direction in order to tackle the issue.
- There was concern that, when speaking up on behalf of people who do not have their needs met, you are accused of politicising. Meanwhile, housebuilders lobby on their own behalf and no one disapproves of that.
- It is important to have a focused approach that fits the culture and purpose of the organisation rather than being done because the CEO and board want to.
- Lived experience is absolutely vital. Giving individuals with such experience a platform to voice their concerns can make the voice more powerful. It gives real authenticity to the campaign. Skilling up residents to campaign harnesses their powerful voice that is not heard often enough.
- Another point that was explored was using contacts to create public engagement and have some form of public influence.

Are there geographical elements in campaigning?

- It was acknowledged that not everywhere will have an appetite for campaigning. It can be heavily influenced by geographical areas.
- However, it was highlighted that, as community bodies, housing associations have superb access to constituency MPs and have potential power to exercise material influence. The housing sector could use this platform so much more and is not usually available to the wider charities sector.

Is the housing sector more comfortable talking about themselves rather than campaigning about macro issues?

- It was acknowledged that the housing sector are good at finding solutions and challenging themselves to be different but, when it comes to campaigning and public affairs matters, they shy away. Was this down to the local authority / housing stock transfer origins of many housing

associations? There was an acknowledgement that staying silent on some matters is worse.

- In comparison with the charities sector where equivalent organisations would employ public affairs staff or consultants for campaigning, the housing sector did little. Whilst PlaceShapers was seen as a good example of how non-campaigning housing associations can join together to do this, there was little wider assessment of the value or success achieved on the campaigning from trade bodies.
- Personal experiences were that individuals found it easier to secure speaking slots at party political conferences than NHF / CIH conferences when campaigning because the sector tended to look for mandated individuals / executives to speak rather than giving deemed personal campaigns a platform
- However, it was considered that authenticity is key. There is nothing worse than an inauthentic campaign.
- There was consideration about the bigger macro issues at the moment such as the cost-of-living crisis and fuel crisis which would have an impact both on residents and the housing sector, especially when it relates to people unable to pay rent. This could have an impact on the social housing model. Therefore, macro issues are important to campaign both for residents and housing associations.

Final thoughts

Anne believed that asking residents what they want from the housing sector is important; how housing associations effectively hear the tenant voice is key. Anne believed we are currently in a period where we have to carefully think about how we can add a voice to a growing concern in order to make things change. Anne believed using residents/tenants is an authentic and effective way to do that and move forward.

Peter Hubbard and Ravinderjit Singh Dosanjh

Anthony Collins Solicitors LLP

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