

Our Side of the Fence: an account of a NIMBY campaign

An attempt by Langley House Trust to re-open a hostel for offenders in South London had to be abandoned in the face of opposition from residents, local politicians and the media. **John Adams**, Chief Executive of the Trust, recalls how he coped with events.

5 December 2000

The meeting with local councillors had not gone well. They were not there to listen but to express their anger and opposition. Most of their ammunition came from notes, far from accurate, taken by a housing officer at a meeting of professionals where we thought we were among colleagues.

“Paedophile hostel planned” was the first headline to appear. Although the article that followed stated that the hostel was for a wide range of offenders, I knew that the headline would stick. The training I had received taught me to look at PR through the eyes of ‘Dot and Sid’, a hypothetical couple who have very little understanding of the wider issues. Dot and Sid would be having nightmares tonight.

domain about the work of hostels and the sort of treatment programmes that are available. ‘What Works’ is professional-speak and the public is still firmly of the view that nothing works. In the area around the hostel, described as ‘Nappy Valley’, fear was easily generated. We were unable to provide statistics in support of arguments that hostels reduce crime and do not have a negative impact on the immediate neighbourhood.

The absence of such a positive campaign meant we were always playing catch-up. It was easy for the community to whip up public feeling against the projects. They didn’t need facts and figures - they could invent the scares. They had the half-truth notes which were banded about as minutes. With these, they had the media eating out of their hands.

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The Trust’s Finance Director was rapidly fitted with his new hat - that of Press Officer. A small organisation does not have the luxury of such a post buffering the Chief Executive from direct contact from the media and the public. The phone calls from press and public began to flow in.

Together with the Press Officers in Police and Probation, we produced a non-descript press release - a holding operation to see how things developed. It was not going to convince anybody. With hindsight we should have had a pro-active campaign in place before we had even set foot in the territory. We had done our preparations on inter-agency social work and risk management but there was nothing on the PR side.

There was a lack of information in the public

to do a piece. When journalists want you, they want you now. They were like piranhas - frenzied - massed together yet each only interested in their own story. Do we feed the frenzy? We know they are being fed from the other end of the pond so the frenzy won’t stop. We begin to try to give them some alternative food - the rational variety.

We spend time as a team, and with the other agencies, rehearsing words hoping they come out right. They don’t at first. Laughter helps to relieve the tension. We all feel better when responses begin to be ingrained and the ‘lines to take’ are credible. We reduce the points we want to get across to three or four. ‘Dot and Sid’ can’t take in too much information at once.

We do more press and radio stuff. I am livid when the local paper does not publish my letter - a simple rejection slip - it was a good letter that took some time to write - maybe too long, too detailed. The anger is increased when a radio station edits out some of the best things I have said. Most of the journalists and editors appear almost casual about the issues. Speed and story are their driving forces. Do they realise how they are turning public opinion?

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The press was in full attendance when residents of Balham staged a demonstration against the planned hostel.

A piece to camera for BBC London Live went well. It was done on a rooftop overlooking Balham. We could see the interviewer's house from up there but he still seemed willing to take a balanced view. The questions were probing but gave opportunities to counter some of the myths - a refreshing change from the usual rhetorical and barbed variety.

A Sunday morning live radio telephone interview with the Chair of Wandsworth Council on another line also went well. By now I was confident of the issues (to the extent that I was still in bed at the time). Anyone listening with an open mind would have received some information and, maybe, have been persuaded to change their views.

18 January

It was foolish to take too much encouragement from these things. The public meeting went badly. 150 inside to whom we gave fair answers. 500 outside to whom we gave a leaflet. Journalists and editors made the most of the rowdy crowd scenes which were repeated the following Sunday when 2500 turned out on Tooting Common!

Although this was a low moment in the media

struggle, there were soon signs that the mass protest headlines were 'fish and chip' news. The silent majority of the public was beginning to express other views. They were fed up with the uninformative leaflets whipping up the hostility. They were ready to enter the debate or even to come out in favour of the project recognising that this was the best method of managing dangerous offenders and that Wandsworth was not a crime-free paradise. The BBC started looking at the political manoeuvrings of the councillors and MPs and at last we began to feel that there was light at the end of the tunnel.

As is so often the case, the light at the end of the tunnel was just another train coming in our direction. Fairly rapidly, matters were taken out of our control. A cooling off period to prepare a 'consultation strategy' soon became a ministerial decision not to proceed with dangerous offenders in this location. We packed our bags.

The media contacted us to check the situation. They now sounded rather disappointed. Just when they could see a different side to the story, a new phase in the struggle and a wider debate, the plug had been pulled. The phone stopped ringing.

John Adams has been Chief Executive of Langley House Trust since 1993, prior to which he worked for 20 years in the Probation Service. The Trust provides over 200 units of supported accommodation across England. Working closely with the Home Office, the Trust has sought to develop effective methods of managing risk and supervising those offenders who are most 'difficult to place'.

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