

What We Learnt: the Community Plan for Holloway Learning Resource

In 2022 Community Plan for Holloway (CP4H) commissioned evaluation research. This was a valuable opportunity for CP4H to reflect on their practices and organisational structure during a phase of transition, following Peabody Housing Association's planning application to LB Islington Planning Committee to redevelop the site of the former women's prison at Holloway. The research asked the following questions:

- What has the campaign achieved already?
- What can the campaign learn from experiences so far?
- How can the campaign develop more effective and inclusive strategies going forwards?

In April 2022 a group of people involved in CP4H, including trustees, employees, residents and long-term and more recent activists, got together for a workshop to reflect on what they thought the campaign had learnt over time. This meeting took place shortly after the developer's controversial planning application was approved by the local authority, following a long and sustained period of campaigning over several years. ***What We Learnt*** is a summary of the workshop discussion and related email exchanges and conversations. It is designed to be used by CP4H and shared with other campaigns in order to elicit discussion and learning more widely. Specific questions addressed in the workshop were:

- What has been learnt from the process?
- What worked and what didn't?
- What were the factors that have supported the campaign's achievements?
- How can barriers to the campaign's success be addressed?
- How can continued reflection and self-evaluation be embedded into campaign strategies?
- What advice would you give to other campaigns?

What made the campaign's achievements possible? *Building a Campaign and Alliances*

People are your greatest asset: their commitment, energy, enthusiasm and belief that change is possible will drive a campaign. People have to believe that they have the power to make political change.

Tea and Biscuits Offensive. Talk to a wide range of people. Involving many different actors and interests from the start can be challenging, but this is a key strength. Everybody brings something important. Take time to have lots of one-to-one conversations. Seek people out where they are, including visits to organisations, talking to small groups, having public meetings and reaching out to faith organisation and trade unions. Find Common Ground. Be

available. Repeat the message: *You are as much part of the community as anyone else and your view is important.*

Keep the campaign message simple. Your campaign may address a number of interests and demands but have one overall simple message. Then repeat it again and again. People often don't have time to be immersed in the detail.

Make it easy for new people to get involved and up to speed with the situation and campaign. The campaign should be able to accommodate those who maintain a solid commitment over time, as well as people who prefer to 'float in and out'. That is ok.

Build Politically Strategic Alliances. Our campaign was in a borough with high levels of political engagement and therefore we were able to build strong connections to local organised party politics. Inevitably there will be tensions. **Recognise there will be differences but work towards a relationship where you can agree to disagree.** Encourage people to be transparent about their political interests or affiliations.

Build Alliances with other campaigns. Learn from and support each other. Sharing information strengthens each other. e.g. We got agreement for 42% Social Housing possible partly due to a freedom of information request made by another campaign.

Identify your USP. Think about what is unique about your campaign or site? Our site is a former women's prison. This ignited a lot of local passion, led to a key campaign demand for a Women's Building and lent us to focus on issues that women face. As there is little green space in our borough, this also became a key focus for getting local people involved.

Develop a strong visual presence. Think about your 'brand'. Be consistent with your use of colour, font and logo to help communicate your message and be recognised.

Find creative ways to get people involved and feel part of the campaign. Campaigning can be challenging so it's important that people feel they belong. Fun social and cultural events will strengthen people's sense of solidarity and commitment. Art and crafts are a great way to get people involved, such as creating placards, posters, paintings and models representing your demands. It shouldn't all be about meetings. Text is only one form of communication, so produce eye-catching visuals to get your message across.

Get press attention! Local, national, international. Think big! Make connections.

Campaign Structure and Processes

Deciding on the right structure for your campaign is important to be effective.

Think about the form your organisation might take. Will you remain informal? Or is it more useful to form a non-profit or a charity? How does this influence eligibility for funding? What are the advantages and disadvantages of different organisational structures?

Think about Social Capital. Do you want to bring in influential or representative people into the campaign? If so, in what role? Would they be on a board of trustees or advisory group? Could they lead or contribute to specific tasks?

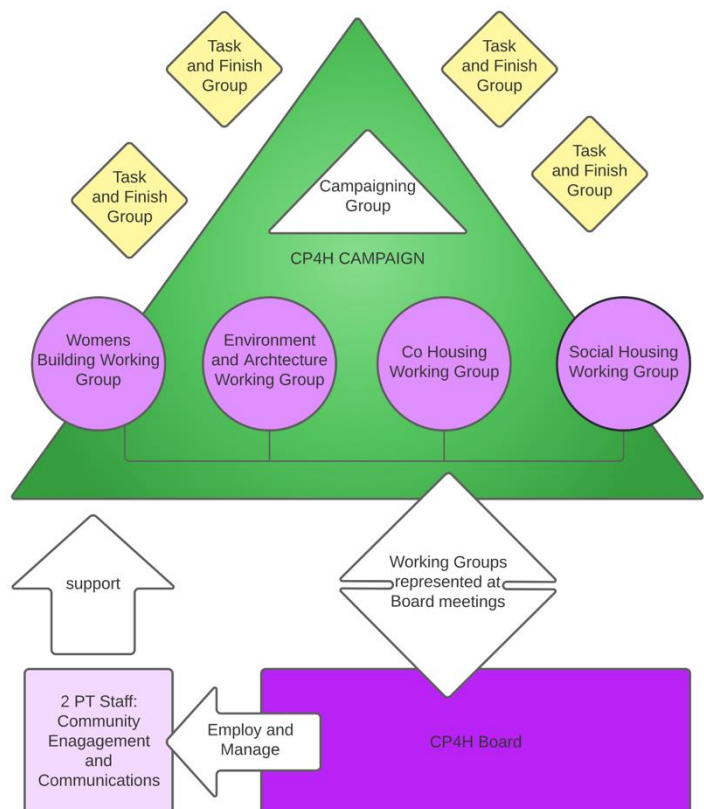
Board members. At Board level it is important to make strategic appointments to make sure a wide range of interests are represented. This might include people involved in other campaigns, professionals or diverse representatives of particular groups. People who are attracted to operating at Board level within such a formal structure are often informed, capable and ‘helpful’ people with ‘social capital’ who are able to commit personal time to a campaign. They may represent established political interests. Such people can be invaluable, providing expertise and taking the message outwards, but beware of the board becoming ‘incorporated’ or co-opted into particular political interests. Also beware of the board becoming dominated by ‘well informed and experienced’ campaigners and excluding people directly affected by the campaign but less confident in formal organisational settings. Bring those people on board through targeted selection with ongoing support, mentoring and/or training as needed.

The CP4H structure

CP4H have a Board, Working Groups and wider-campaign structure (Figure 1). The aim has been to combine clear decision-making processes and accountability with democratic spaces of expression and influence.

The Board meets fortnightly to address matters such as governance, finance, fundraising, staffing and issues raised by the Working groups and campaigners.

The campaign fundraised for two part-time **paid staff** with responsibilities for community engagement and campaign organising, regarded by many as crucial for the campaign’s effectiveness. However, be careful that paid staff are not expected to pick up *all* the campaign ideas and work. This needs to be managed as there is “this massive tidal wave of great ideas and just not enough people to follow them through” (campaign participant).



CP4H set up several **Working Groups**, early on, useful to:

- Focus and amplify specific aspects of the campaign (e.g. housing, the Women’s Building, environment and architecture)
- Concentrate expertise,

- interest and action around key areas.
- Feed important information to the Board and vice versa.

These groups, which brought together technical support, professional expertise, experience and everyday knowledge were useful for developing a rounded understanding about the implications of the development. This can be communicated to local people, the press, the local authority and local councillors, most of whom will not have such a good understanding. It is important that the different kinds of expert/everyday knowledges get heard and valued.

The campaign also put together some **strategic task groups**, often time-limited, to focus on particular campaign strategies, challenges and events, such as: communications; diversity and inclusion; women in construction; organising public meetings; running an art competition; the Women's Building Advisory Panel.

The campaign more broadly includes all those involved, such as those providing their views, attending the actions and hosting campaigners at their organisations and groups. They must all be kept on board and feel included and valued.

All parts of the campaign need to be carefully balanced. One working group should not dominate, which can be assisted by summary updates from all the working groups at overall campaign meetings. There also needs to be good communication between the groups and the Board.

How to keep people on board and make the campaign inclusive?

- **Cast the net wide** and don't pre-determine the campaign goals in order to allow participants to shape its direction.
- Make sure there are lots of ways people can get involved in your campaign (not just reading documents and meetings).
- **Get out on the streets** and talk to people
- **Go to people** and their events rather than expecting them to come to you and yours.
- Find out what interests them about the site.
- Find ways to engage people less listened to.
- **Get young people involved** – such as through social media, TikTok, a competition or their parents.
- **Put on attention grabbing events** – make them appealing, colourful, fun, hands on and family friendly. Make banners, placards and art.
- **Make the information accessible** – such as on-line teach-ins on planning, putting short videos on your website.
- **Explain how your campaign is organised.** Use graphics, show the structure, lines of communication and decision-making processes. Be transparent.
- **Think about using an online collaboration platform** such as Slack, Asana or Basecamp. These are useful horizontal communication tools where groups can come

together to share files, propose ideas, share information, store files and chat. Not everyone will use online spaces so they should be one amongst several communication strategies and are good for sustaining campaigns between events and meetings and during pandemic restrictions.

- **Develop inclusive meeting principles**– such as introductory check ins and check outs. Ensure everyone is ‘up to speed’ with the discussions. Encourage quieter people to speak and develop strategies for managing dominant voices.
- **Develop supportive and diverse pathways into the campaign.** Newcomers can be given an induction sheet/session/video; provide follow-ups or buddy schemes. Enable people to participate in different ways e.g. meetings, street actions, sharing information with their neighbours etc

How to navigate complex planning and development processes and interests?

Find out who is out there to support you. Who has the information you need? Can you invite experts, decision-makers or community advocates to explain issues? (e.g. Planning Aid groups, planning officers, councillors, architects or local groups such as Just Space, women’s groups, etc.?).

Do a power analysis. Power mapping is a tool to identify lines of influence and key decision-makers. This tool is best used from the outset and then reviewed throughout campaigns. This will help activists find key support as well as target key opponents, crucial to focus the campaign and develop strategies to negotiate with or contest powerful corporate and government agents. These exercises will assist understanding of the fields of power in particular contexts, including identifying weaknesses and opportunities. This will help you to develop effective strategies against well-resourced and duplicitous PR teams and developers. Ask: Who are the people with influence at which stages?

Map the planning timeline from the start, identifying key moments for participation and influence and ensuring everyone understands the different stages of the process. Represent this textually and visually on your website. Planning Aid for London and other specialist community advocate groups can help with this. It will take ongoing time and labour to keep people up to speed with complex and changing development processes, but clear information about what to expect will help to keep people on board over time.

Research your developer. Where is the money coming from? Who are their financial partners? What are the developer’s ambitions for other programmes? Examine their track record. Have other campaigns been fought against them? What happened? Would it be useful to talk to other campaigners or tenants?

Understand how developers operate. Will the developer try to co-opt your campaign? Be alert to flattery, deception and tricks such as withholding important information, representing it in jargon-ridden inaccessible ways or presenting it too late. PR firms and research consultants will be employed to ensure consultations support the developers plans so identify and object to deliberate omissions and obfuscations. It can be useful to engage in

negotiation with the developer but do not allow them to use this to validate their own interests.

Understand the wider politics of housing development. Due to the withdrawal of full state funding for council house building, urban developments provide their council/social housing elements through the profits ('surplus') from private or 'affordable' housing. This principle is generally the same whether your developer is a private company, housing association or local authority special vehicle. Understanding more about this structural problem and how it is operating on your development will help you to illuminate the interests and intentions of your decision-makers, target your campaign and develop effective strategies

Understand your capacity and limitations. Set priorities. These will change over time with changing impacts on staff and campaign capacity. Try to plan ahead, preparing for times when lengthy detailed work is needed. Keep ahead of the developers and council as much as possible, avoiding only being reactive to their agenda and sending the message that you will consistently hold them to account. Capacity-wide this needs to be balanced against core work of growing a grassroots campaign and identifying community demands.

Learn from other campaigners. Many things your campaign are struggling with are not unique so get in touch, share knowledge and build solidarities.

Communicate with the Councillors. Make relationships early in your campaign and keep talking. You can be sure the developers are getting their message across so make this does not subvert yours. Don't assume the councillors have expert planning knowledge, usually campaigners have a better understanding so develop ongoing relationships and clear communication. Find out about your councillors, what their interests are, their relationship with their party and with the developer. This will help you target and build support and avoid the developers or party political interests running the show.

A campaign needs to say what it wants and stick to it. A union shop steward's key task is to communicate what the workers want - not to improve the boss's proposals which will always be contrary to the workers' interests. (Workshop participant)

Don't assume your local council are interested in learning or reflecting. They may well have their own agenda and/or be defensive.

Identify gaps in your knowledge and influence: For example, have you spoken to people who understand local service provision (education, health, disability, youth, older people's services, etc.)? They can add understanding and support to your campaign.

It's been a game of chess and we have been outplayed. We couldn't see who the other players were and what their moves are.... just that you have to react to them. Session participant.

Use the Planning Documents. The Local Plan, Supplementary planning documents (SPD) and strategic or regional plans are legal documents, so crucial for holding the decision-makers to account and contesting plans. Work to influence the SPD so that it includes your demands. But approach with care. This is not job done and not the only way to exert influence. You need to carefully consider when and how working with the council is useful or not over time. Other tactics, such as direct action, may be more effective at different times.

Keep Learning: Learn From Your Mistakes, Challenges and Successes

The community feel they have voted for us but we're now like the shadow cabinet. We are still connected even if we didn't win the election. Trustee Session Participant

You will learn a lot. It is important to regularly review and evaluate what you have learnt.

Learn from your mistakes. Take time to regularly reflect together when things don't go to plan. Campaigns are often focussed on action and goals. But you also need to step back and reflect so that you can learn and be flexible. It is easy to get stuck into routine ways of doing things that may not always be the most effective strategies. You regularly reflect in meetings and hold dedicated learning workshops.

Develop questions to reflect on? Such as returning to power mapping as it changes over time. Asking: What and who are you up against? Which organisations and groups can support you and how? Who can you support? What do we want to achieve? What is realistic? What is the value of ideals? This will help you evaluate how to push different agents. It will help you to know when to stick or move on from goals.

Balance strategic influence with community engagement. Try to strike a balance between listening to and amplifying a wide range of voices, with being focused and strategic. Beware of being spread too thin and becoming ineffective.

When people leave your campaign - try to stay in touch, find out why they left and learn from this.

Keep working on your Communications Strategy – both within and outwards from the campaign. Consider bringing in communications experts to maximise your influence. Review your changing messages, intended audiences and strategies .