

Making your approach

So you want to get your message across to your local candidate? Homeless Link Board member Oilly Grender looks at some of the pitfalls and gives tips on approaching candidates

Ok, it is time to say something really unfashionable. Spare a thought for the poor beleaguered parliamentary candidate at the next general election. Yes, yes, these people are politicians loathed only marginally less than estate agents and journalists. But they are humans too and at the end of the day some of them will be making vital decisions that affect homelessness policies.

How you approach them and convince them on issues around homelessness depends entirely on understanding your average candidate during a campaign period.

They spend most of the four-week campaign racing around at the orders of their campaign manager. Knocking on doors every day - if they are still in full time work - every evening. Some with limited support will be out delivering leaflets and some with no support will be doing the writing, printing and folding too. Their families rarely see them and are fed up with them when they do. If the candidate is high profile they will also be preparing intensely for cross-examination in the media. Imagine facing Paxman on only four hours' sleep a night for the previous three weeks and you will be getting close to how it feels.

At the last election I was responsible for producing the briefing that went out to Lib Dem candidates every morning, what was in the media, lines to take on the stories of the day. A crucial briefing from party HQ sent to them by 6am every morning and yet some didn't have time to read it.

In that context it is hard to imagine that candidates absorb any information from the various charity campaigns aimed at them. They are like headless chickens, many don't have time to draw breath or take a loo break let alone think! Which is why it is crucial that you approach them in the right way.

Don't, whatever you do, send on that campaign letter that has been sent to you by a national charity. The result will be a standard response drafted by a policy wonk sent by their party headquarters to all candidates. Only those with the time, which is rare, will add a personal touch. If you do receive a national campaign letter, make it your own add relevant local statistics or case histories.

Don't expect them to read long tedious papers with your views on what the policies should be on homelessness over the next 20 years. It won't get read; they don't have the time.

Don't harangue them at a local meeting or while they are doing a walkabout. To be honest if you really dislike a particular candidate you should be utterly charming, keep them talking for as long as possible and waste their time when they could be talking to people who might vote for them!

Do participate in local church meetings or encourage service users. All candidates attend these and it is a great opportunity to put across a message about homelessness in your area.

Do get involved in phone-ins or involve clients. They are a great opportunity to put questions directly to the candidate and local radio is awash with them during the campaign.

Do go to their local surgeries, and ideally take a client to speak about their own experiences.

If you have a great photo opportunity ... new building, new service, new facility, registering homeless people to vote etc. Do offer it to the candidates. But remember: if you have charitable status you must approach all the main parties equally. This tends to be more of an issue for national organisations but is part of the charity regulations.

For those of you who have civil servant contacts this is the perfect time. They are not allowed to deal with the politicians and if they are not on holiday they are likely to be more available than usual for a meeting.

Enjoy the campaign!

For Homeless Link's practical campaign toolkit, drawing on the themes raised in our manifesto on homelessness visit our website at www.endhomelessness.org.uk.