

# Winning the public vote: a campaign for Braintree District Council

## The challenge

Council housing in Braintree was in desperate need of improvement.

A depleted housing budget had seen Braintree District Council's 9,000 homes suffer from years of under-investment and the pressure was on to turn the situation around. The Government had ruled that all local authorities must bring their council homes up to the Decent Homes Standard by 2010 – a minimum standard of quality.

Braintree District Council proposed to transfer its homes to a new social landlord, which could invest the millions of pounds needed to bring homes up to scratch.

The scheme could only go ahead if local tenants voted in favour. However, initial research found that just 20% of tenants supported change, with 53% firmly opposed. There was suspicion about the Council's motives and confusion about what transfer would involve.

Meanwhile, an opposition group, Defend Council Housing, had targeted the area and was urging tenants to vote 'no'.

IPB was brought on board to reinvigorate the consultation process.

## What we did

We helped the Council to take the campaign directly to tenants, using a wide range of methods.

### Key strands of activity included:

- Tabloid-style newsletters, delivered to every home. Bright, eye-catching and written in a language that tenants could understand.
- A DVD for every home, presented by a local celebrity, and featuring interviews with tenants and housing staff.
- A pocket guide: all Council staff who had face-to-face contact with tenants were armed with these 'at a glance' guides, to help them answer questions.
- Freephone advice line: set up to answer tenants' questions. IPB trained employees staffing the phones, and created a comprehensive Q&A document.
- Van liveries.
- Posters: in community centres, housing offices and local libraries.
- Local press ads.
- A roadshow: this toured local estates, answering tenants' questions and distributing literature.
- Showhome: we transformed two existing Council homes, so that tenants could experience the quality of improvements they would enjoy after transfer.

- Press campaign: we briefed local papers on the issues, and sent out a steady stream of press releases, highlighting the benefits.
- Research: we ran telephone tracking polls, to gauge the shift in tenant opinion and address gaps or areas of confusion.
- Door-knocking: Council staff visited every home in the district, to answer tenants' questions. IPB hosted a training day, to prepare staff for this exercise.
- Rumour-busting: we hit-back at Defend Council Housing by issuing point-by-point responses to their claims.
- Political briefings: we issued briefing notes, and copies of our newsletters to key local councillors and local MPs. Wherever possible, we involved politicians in photo calls, press releases and newsletters, to demonstrate that transfer had heavyweight backing.

## Results

At the ballot, 62% of tenants voted 'yes' to transfer – a remarkable turnaround.

The new landlord, Greenfields Community Housing, went live in November 2007.

## What the client said

“IPB played a critical role in achieving a positive ballot result. They significantly increased the effectiveness of our communication with tenants. It was a major challenge for us to get a 'yes' vote, and without IPB, I don't think that we would have done it.”

**Martyn Woodward**, Housing Options Project Manager for Braintree Council