

Property campaign

WHY WE NEED A CAMPAIGN FOR PROPERTY EDUCATION

This column started as a think piece and ended up as a consultation exercise. My plans are admittedly still on the drawing board but today I am inviting my fellow charity professionals to a brainstorm. All help and ideas most gratefully received.

My idea is for a campaign for property education for not-for-profits. My reason for starting to plan now is timing: I strongly believe 2016 is the year we should collaborate to achieve a systemic shift in property knowledge and premises management in our sector, before interest rates rise and the full impact of austerity economics blows in.

If my previous life as a business journalist on national newspapers taught me anything, it is that being equipped in time for change makes the difference between thriving and attracting investment or losing your market and going under. I am thinking of swathes of home grown British manufacturing from early IT and cars to china and crystal. Where is the third sector going to be 10 years from now – once property markets have finished being stoked up through quantitative easing and austerity economics have finished shrinking the state? Plus of course, uncertainty in the markets shrinking grant funding pots still further.

Since 2004 my organisation has delivered fantastic work supporting voluntary organisations with property advice but sadly so much pain can be avoided with good planning and clued up trustees. I'm talking about cases of door-stepping bailiffs, evictions, hell on earth lease negotiations, sociopathic landlords, sick joke 'asset' transfers, dodgy builders and even dodgier dilapidation bills. My colleagues are amazing, kind and patient people with huge knowledge, but surely as a sector it is time to shift emphasis to prevention through education.

Arguably since 2008 our work has been undertaken in the context of a third sector industrial revolution which has been slow, grinding and fragmented; and often suffered in isolation as so much local support infrastructure disappeared. Hence my strong feeling now that after 8 years' pain and market readjustment

- and before the macroeconomic picture gets worse - we have to seize the day as a sector and help each other to build property resilience. I am considering a 3 year campaign, comprising a first class online educational offering, maybe a budding system and getting out on the road with advice clinics and training. Key markets? - trustees, funders and staff in organisations with an annual turnover of less than £750,000. These are the people that did not come into the sector to manage property and yet cannot afford property managers.

How about a long running storyline about property management in a soap? Why not? Every storyline is everyday fare at a charity somewhere. This is a sector that according to NCVO spends £39bn a year in general expenditure - the second item of which is property costs. The sector also owns property worth £22bn - this is not buttons.

A crucial ingredient would be a way for bigger charities to transfer their knowledge and resources to help smaller ones. What role should the property industry play? What would success look like? What outcomes should we seek? How could we best measure impact?

Last week over a bottle of wine, I asked some charity CEOs for their views. It might have been the Malbec, but suggestions ranged from a statutory requirement for charity trustees to sit a property management test, to a legal requirement for funders to prove they have done due diligence on a charity's property circumstances before they issue project funding disconnected to the building it will be delivered in. I can't see either of those happening, but all good for the pot.

What about cost? I'm working on a 3 year budget and now have two property companies, a wealth manager and a high street bank asking me for details. A great strength of our sector is that we're used to doing miracles on a shoe string with in-kind support. Our besetting sin is we don't think big enough and this is where the private sector could help. Can you help? If so, email: mail@ethicalproperty.org.uk. Subject line: 'campaign for property education' ■



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