

LIBRARY OF HOPE: SHREWSBURY CREATING POSITIVE LOCAL PRESSURE



In 2013, far-right groups the English Defence League and the British National Party launched social media campaigns against the creation of a new Shrewsbury Muslim Centre. Suddenly, a relatively small Muslim community had become the focus of national far-right movements.

When the far right tries to divide a community, particularly around ‘trigger events’ like the opening of a Muslim Centre, they often try to frame themselves as the voice of a community. In Shrewsbury, local people chose to reclaim the narrative. To push back against the far-right and show solidarity with the local Muslim community, locals created a petition to voice support for the plans for the Centre, and to send a message of an inclusive and welcoming town.

Nearly 700 locals signed a letter in just five days (an impressive turnaround given the size of the community and digital access in 2013). Handed to the leader of the local council, the letter received substantial coverage in the local press. It also brought together dozens of local people, who began planning a more long-term campaign of positivity and inclusion in the town.

Petitions are a simple, well-understood way of building local pressure. Their impact is not just in the petition itself, but the ability to use this as a story for local press, and demonstrate that there are more who stand for a confident, welcoming and open community than stand against it. Taking lessons from the Shrewsbury campaign, here are some tips on creating local, positive pressure:

SET YOUR GOAL AND TONES

Set a goal that’s positive, specific and achievable. Sometimes this will be decided for you by the actions of the far right, like “Protect the Shrewsbury Muslim Centre”. A positive, clear message lays out clearly what the choice facing your town is – confidence and optimism, or division and negativity.



CHOOSE YOUR DECISION-MAKER

Who can enact the change you’re after? Do you need the council to step in and protect a planning process? Or a government minister to push a change in policy? Be as specific as possible – and name them if you can! You can find out who your local [MP](#) or [councillors](#) are, and how to contact them, online.



Who else do you want to reach? Do you want to shift local mood? If so, think about how to get your petition in the local papers. Local paper staff are often very busy, so will be very happy to get a writeup of a local campaign if you make it easy to turn it into an article. Or ring your local radio stations to see if you can get on, and use any campaign events or milestones as an excuse to get back in touch – most explain how to submit ideas on their website, or at least provide contact details for their editors.

WRITE YOUR PETITION

Choose a way of collecting signatures – pen and paper still work for hyper-local, small petitions, but online platforms like [38degrees](#) or [change.org](#) might help you reach more people and organise your signatures more easily (as well as keep your petitioning socially distanced if it needs to be!).



Put your positivity into words – this is where we’re explicit about the community resilience we’re looking to create. Use a short, clear title that includes your ask, the name of your community and positive language like “protect” or “save”.

In the body of your petition, remind people of the strength of your community – that it is a resilient, welcoming place – and ask your audience to remember that when they think about your cause.

If you're able and comfortable, consider asking people to include their address to create a local voice.

GET SIGNATURES



Ask for help! Look around for people who care about your cause- whether it's countering far right narratives, extending solidarity, or protecting a local institution. There will be a lot of people who care about making your town a welcoming place, but they might not be shouting as loud as the EDL or BNP!

Use your networks: email your friends and family to get the ball rolling, let them know that this cause is important to you and ask them to share it on.

Social Media: online petition platforms make it really easy to share your petition on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram - try finding local Facebook groups to get a local discussion going and find more supporters.

Hit the street (lockdown restrictions pending): most petition platforms will provide printout sheets to collect signatures, so take a copy of your petition to your work or local high street.

You can also get in touch with us to see if there are any HOPE not hate groups or activists near you!

ORGANISE A PETITION HAND-IN



Once you have enough signatures, or if there's a planning deadline or event you're working towards, then contact your decision-maker. Persistence is key here, so make sure to keep trying them until you get a response! Once your foot is in the door, explain your petition as clearly and positively as possible, and ask them if you can arrange a hand-in.

If your decision-maker is receptive, invite the local press (or bring your own photographer) and celebrate! If they're dragging their heels, ask your supporters to write to them as well.

KEEP MOVING!



A petition hand-in isn't the end - this is about fostering a visible sense of resilience in your community, so write to your supporters and plan your next steps. Maybe this is the creation of a local campaign group, or working with your Council to set up an advisory committee.