

LIBRARY OF HOPE: FRIAR PARK, SANDWELL



CREATING POSITIVE LOCAL NARRATIVES

In 2006 the far-right British National Party (BNP) won 33% of the vote in Friar Park, a poor housing estate of 10,000 people in the West Midlands – it was the first time they'd ever stood in the seat.

The population of Friar Park at the time was 98% white British, sat within the much more diverse town of Sandwell. The BNP's presence in the area posed a significant challenge to the local community – their support had seemingly come out of nowhere, and suggested deeper resentments and tensions between communities that could easily escalate.

Far-right surges are often met with 'traditional' anti-racist activism, like marches or leafletting. But in areas like Friar Park there can be a risk of further alienating the mostly white British estate from the communities around it. Framing the situation as a conflict risked dismissing the estate's residents as all far-right, demoralising anti-racists already present in Friar Park, and further weakening the broader sense of community. Instead, local activists together with a local Councillor chose to see the electoral result as a call to action: to address a broader sense of disenfranchisement and isolation that the BNP were tapping into.

To push back, local residents got together to tell their own story, and reshape the narrative about the estate. They created a magazine for the estate's residents, by the estate's residents, called Friar

Park Matters. Delivered weekly through every door on the estate, the magazine shared positive stories from local residents as part of a wider campaign of community engagement and local-pride building. In time, Friar Park Matters gained the foothold and trust it needed to begin a project of anti-racist activism of its own.

Friar Park Matters helped to shape a more positive sense of place, and played a significant part in keeping the BNP out in future elections - with the party only getting half as many votes the next year.

CREATING NEW LOCAL NARRATIVES

The way a community understands itself directly impacts its ability to be confident and cohesive in the face of change. Here's a quick guide to creating your own local narratives through a local magazine, taking lessons learned by Friar Park Matters.

GET ORGANISED

A diversity of voices is important, as is sharing the workload of a project like this. Find others who care about your community and its openness and optimism.



Often these groups of people already exist – for Friar Park Matters, it was the young mothers attending a local Sure Start centre, who felt left out of local politics despite being heavily invested in the estate that they're raising their children in. Think about what community groups or local institutions are already around you, and how you can work together to create the local narratives you want to see.

BUILD YOUR DISTRIBUTION NETWORK

Impacting the local narrative can be surprisingly cheap - in 2006 you'd have a much harder time getting a local Facebook group off the ground. While we haven't left the world of print just yet, it's possible to shape a positive narrative entirely digitally – start a Facebook [group](#) or a [website](#), use friends and family to start building your audience, and start posting!



Still, establishing a small pot for printing, distribution or other expenses can be useful if you're able to do it – whether to create a physical publication or to advertise your digital one locally. In Sandwell, Friar Park Matters turned to the local MP, who secured a small grant from the Regional Development board to hire a short-term, part-time community worker to establish the magazine.

TELL YOUR STORY

Decide how you want to impact the local conversation. Does your community need to be prouder of its strengths? More connected to local services? More understanding of each other?



Friar Park Matters highlighted positive stories happening in the local community, advertised key events and promoted services, particularly health services, that were available to local people. It was distributed to local shops and homes by volunteers, setting its tone early as both informative and celebratory - proud of Friar Park and invested in the people who live there.

It soon established itself as a key source of local information, everything from which shops were open when, to services for fighting isolation, and who had the best Christmas lights in the estate. By becoming a regular part of people's lives, Friar Park Matters created a platform from which it could speak to a more inclusive community and push back against the fear mongering of the BNP.

ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY

Becoming a material part of local life - through events, competitions, small charity initiatives - can build up engagement from the local community and establish your messaging campaign as a defining part of the local landscape.



Could you create a steering group of locals to organise an event programme? Could your newsletter engage people in choosing charitable causes and raising funds and support?

The summer after it was founded, the Friar Park Matters group held what would be the first of the estate's now annual summer festival, packing the estate with stalls, dancing and games. After a few years, over 1,500 people were attending.

Creating a consistent vehicle to promote a sense of community, like a magazine, and expanding it out into local initiatives like festivals or education, can tie cohesion and anti-racism to the needs of local people. It also keeps these efforts grounded in the community, and makes it much easier to confront the far right than it would be from the outside.

