

## Val Knight tells how they got going with local groups in Sussex

I first went along to Sussex Defend the NHS's monthly meetings about three years ago. Every month we looked at more and more evidence that the NHS was being privatised, piece by piece, secretly! We constructed "difficult questions" to present to the CCG and HWB and our MP. We attended the public part of their meetings and presented our questions and two things became clear:

- 1) we would never get straight answers.
- 2) the members of the CCG / HWB and most professional health workers did not really understand what was happening themselves!

After a few months I realized that 40 of us meeting monthly and harassing the CCG/HWB, plus two leafleting stalls per month was not going to cut it. We needed millions of people to rise up angrily against what was happening. But most people had no way of knowing what was happening! How could 30-40 of us get the message to 350,000 people in greater Brighton?

Then I had three conversations in quick succession that suggested a possible solution.

An acquaintance, to whom I was talking about the NHS changes: "I believe you, but I can't bear to think about it, it's just too scary and too big! What can just a few people do?" To my politically aware daughter: "Why don't you come to the NHS meeting with me tonight, you need to know what is happening." Reply: "Mum, by the time I have dealt with the kids, I don't even get to eat till nine o'clock at night and the baby wakes me up, and I cannot face bussing into town and not getting home till ten at night."

BUT she did go to a Mums' group meeting at the end of her road a few days later!

And finally, after a very well attended public meeting held by Defend the NHS, I was contacted by a woman who said: "I am so incensed by what I heard at your meeting that I have written a letter to my neighbours, telling them what is happening. Please would you fact-check before I deliver it?"

And a light bulb lit up! To get the maximum number of people involved and informed a campaign needs to be a positive message of what can be achieved - not just piles of terrifying facts.

It needs to be local:

- o because people are more likely to walk down the road and come with a friend or neighbour, than bus around town probably on their own
- o because changing your neighbourhood is more achievable than changing the world (and helps you get to know people in your community)
- o because it feels tolerable – delivering just five leaflets to neighbours is OK if that is all you can do - ANY help is achieving more than doing nothing.]

We always stress this: Just prior to this I thought that if we had a highly visible poster that people could put in their window to show support for the NHS - a symbol of the growing unrest about the changes to the NHS - this might also get conversations going and create a network.

So we designed one, with information on the back (below), and 25 people delivered 10,000 across Brighton. Everyone in Brighton has now seen them!

To start the first Neighbourhood Group, as they are now known, we chose the area with the highest NHS poster display response. We wrote a "Dear Blue poster displayer" letter asking if those people would help us start a group in their local streets, by delivering 500 "Dear neighbour" letters offering a meeting at a local venue. 5 people stepped up and delivered, and we got ten attendees at the first meeting and 3 apologies.

Those people were gold dust and have helped grow the group, so within 6 months we have about 20-30 active supporters and another 50 locals who want to be kept informed and will help occasionally.

We discussed what we could do and came up with:

- o talk to our neighbours and friends about the NHS
- o blue poster delivery door to door locally, talking to those who are willing to talk/deliver information leaflets to those who are out
- o do regular local stalls giving out leaflets and more posters o send out digital information to people who sign up at stalls – they are and wide
- o show films such as "Spirit of 45" about the NHS (Ken Loach) and "Sicko" about the American Health system by Michael Moore. A local cinema manager in one group has shown one of the films, followed by our speakers and Q&A.
- o join existing community events and give out leaflets, talk to people
- o offer to talk to local parent groups/residents associations/ church groups
- o offer local meetings with speakers who explain what is happening to the NHS
- o leaflet outside local sixth form and higher education colleges
- o a GP group has formed in one area of mainly retired GPs who are trying to activate GPs!
- o and anything else that a member of a Neighbourhood group comes up with – ownership is very important!

Since then we have set up four more neighbourhood groups all of which are operating in similar ways. At our last public meeting we put out sign-up sheets for various Neighbourhood areas around town and now have so many groups waiting to start up that we can hardly keep up!! We believe that this is the way to move towards a mass rebellion against privatisation of the NHS.

So here we go ...

1. Identify up to 20 areas within your area. Try to choose a cross-section of demographics
2. If you have not NHS Blue Postered your area you could start with a well publicised public meeting and put out Email sign-up sheets for the local areas you have identified.
3. Ask the sign ups to suggest a free (or cheap) venue in their immediate locality for the first meeting. We have always managed to find one, especially if the venue supports our cause! (Good to involve people's local knowledge immediately)
4. Choose a date – Mondays to Thursdays work best and 8.00-ish for start so people can get home from work, eat, put kids to bed and WALK to a meeting.
5. Create your Dear Neighbour Letter with date time and venue of meeting and first names of a couple of people as signatories – personal touch is more effective. Ask the people who sign up in each area to deliver 500 "Dear Neighbour" letters to 5-6 streets in their Neighbourhood.
6. Always start small – it is more likely to happen and get support if each person does not need to deliver more than 100 leaflets (half an hour).
7. Deliver during evenings or Sunday pm as people are less likely to scoop up the letter with piles of junk mail and stick it in recycling!!
8. Laminate blue posters and put three or four up in each of your Dear Neighbour streets, with meeting details attached to top or bottom. These posters reinforce and remind people and may get round the letters ending up!!!
9. DO NOT BE DOWNHEARTED IF YOU ONLY GET A HANDFUL OF RESPONSES – it will grow!!
10. Have material ready that offers people a clear narrative of what is happening to the NHS, which you can send digitally to every person who attends, enquires or sends apologies.

Use this for a half hour/45 minute introduction to meeting and tell them you will send it out with minutes after the meeting so they don't have to remember everything that is said or make notes. They can then be asked to send this out on every social network they belong to, to inform more people!

After speaker, allow 20 mins for questions and clarification: THIS IS THE IMPORTANT BIT.

We are not here to bemoan all this, we are here because we want to get information to all our neighbours and build up serious resistance. So the last hour of the meeting is all about devising manageable ways of doing this within our immediate neighbourhood. See list above-not exhaustive!!

This strategy builds good neighbourhood links and allows people to send material out far and wide. We have a target for everyone to bring another recruit with them to the next meeting! We have come across people with invaluable skills and contacts which have helped us.

ALWAYS respond to any contact as soon as possible and in a reasonably personal manner.

\*\*\* More information including sample letters can be found on our website: [www.healthcampaignstogether.com](http://www.healthcampaignstogether.com).