

January 2016 4:26 pm | By Martin Hilditch

After taking over the helm at Placeshapers, how will Aspire's Sinéad Butters steer the ship through difficult times? *Martin Hilditch reports*



The last six months of 2015 could be summarised as *Tales of the Unexpected* for Sinéad Butters.

Like the rest of the sector, the chief executive of 9,000-home Aspire Group was left reeling by the government's surprise announcement in chancellor George Osborne's July budget of a compulsory rent cut for social tenants (1% annually for the next four years), that blew a hole in landlords' business plans.

The news - or "the wet fish in the face moment" as Ms Butters puts it - came two days before an away day for Aspire's entire board. "The executive [team] locked the door and sat in a darkened room to come up with a plan," she says with a pained look.

The next shock was Ms Butters' elevation to chair of one of the most high profile lobbying bodies in the sector - the Placeshapers group of more than 100 community-based housing associations. The surprise lay not in the choice of Ms Butters, but that the previous chair - John Giesen - had only taken up the position a month previously, on 1 September. His almost instantaneous resignation came in the wake

of chancellor George Osborne's budget announcements, and his subsequent decision to stand down as chief executive of 4,500-home association B3 Living.

“I think the summer Budget turned us all upside down.” Sinéad Butters, chief executive, Aspire

“It came very quickly,” Ms Butters says of the change. “I think the summer Budget turned us all upside down, didn't it.”

On top of this came an unequivocally happy moment in November, when Ms Butters found out she was awarded an MBE for her services to housing. “For me, without question, the best part was being able to tell my mum,” she says with enthusiasm, describing her mother as a “real local activist” and former parish council chair who “should have got something like this”.

Making history

As the dust settles on the last six months, Ms Butters must decide the future direction of Placeshapers - and, indeed, steer her own organisation through the current choppy waters (avoiding any further wet fish in the face, of course).

Certainly, Ms Butters seems the ideal choice to lead a lobbying body of community-based associations, steeped as she is in the world of her Staffordshire home. She's a founding fellow of Keele University, where she studied history and politics.

After university she became a trained VAT officer with HM Customs and Excise, working in Newcastle-under-Lyme, where one of her clients was one of the big-name local tourist attractions, Alton Towers. Her life in housing began several years later when she joined the Housing Corporation, as a senior finance officer.

At the Housing Corporation (a forerunner to the Homes and Communities Agency) she helped register the stock transfer of homes from Newcastle-under-Lyme Council to the organisation that would become Aspire. Shortly after the role of regeneration manager at Aspire came up, Ms Butters applied, and the rest is history.

Four principles

She had taken on a job as director of operations for a matter of months when the chief executive role came up in 2006. Having “no track record”, she initially thought “I've got no chance, have I”.

“But as soon as the job came up I knew I would fight tooth and nail to be successful because I just really believed,” she states, saying she “had a real clarity about the sort of organisation I would like to work in and I would like to create here”.

She was, of course, victorious. “The 23 June 2006 is etched on my mind because that’s when I was told,” she says. “And it is just the best day of my professional life.”

Our interview today takes place in the boardroom of PM Training - a social enterprise owned by Aspire that provides training and skills to individuals from across Staffordshire. It is a prime example of what Ms Butters sees as being one of the association’s central aims - “changing the trajectory of our communities”, starting with “the young people who live there who are at the margins of work, education and training”. Or, to put it in Ms Butters’ own words, the business should have an impact on the community that is “almost like when you plink an Alka-Seltzer into water”.



Source: [Fabio De Paola](#)

As many housing associations have begun stripping away their “non-core activities” due to the financial pressures of the rent cut, Ms Butters says that the prioritising of training and skills was not under threat at Aspire.

"We asked ourselves, 'What is the most important thing we do?'," she recalls. "And back to our USP, the most important thing we do is the employment and skills and training."

Nonetheless, there have been hard times due to the rent cut - with Aspire looking to make £4.5m savings. In the last six months the organisation has made 50 redundancies. "There was a lot of pain," Ms Butters states. She doesn't shy away from how hard this has been.

"I've done the most difficult thing in my career ever by making friends redundant, making people who I have worked with for years redundant," she says, lowering her voice. The changes involved cutting back on staffing in areas like resident involvement and looking at some of the free services it provides, such as fencing.

"Placeshapers' voice is more important than ever." Sinéad Butters, chief executive, Aspire

While all this has been happening, Ms Butters has, of course, also been making her first moves as chair of Placeshapers. As a result of the impact of the July Budget changes, Ms Butters says, "Placeshapers' voice is more important than ever."

She's not promising a radical shift - "I think it is business as usual", she says. But, in turbulent times this in itself can be seen as a bold statement. After all, the government has shown little interest in the community-based activities of housing associations, firmly indicating that it sees the sector's prime role as developing homes. This is the environment in which the newly-installed chair must make her mark. Is it not becoming tricky for associations in Placeshapers to stick to their four central principles, which include "providing more than just a landlord service" and being "diverse and values-driven"?

"I'd imagine some associations are making difficult decisions and then worrying about whether they can carry on with the four principles," Ms Butters acknowledges (as may have become obvious, she doesn't swerve a direct question). "But I truly believe that with those four principles you can operate without spending loads of money. It is about what is in your heart as a business."

So helping members deal with the current environment is clearly a current key focus. Ms Butters' early activity includes a programme of visits to members to help gather a "360 degree" view of their concerns.

Maintaining unity within the sector is also a clear priority. We talk about how the National Housing Federation (NHF) has come in for strong criticism from some landlords for the voluntary deal it struck with government to extend the Right to Buy to housing associations. Ms Butters says she disagrees “philosophically” with the policy but that she thinks the NHF’s approach had been the right one under difficult circumstances.

Survival issue

Nonetheless she cautions against public fights on this and other issues moving forwards.

“What we have got to avoid is playing into the hands of anyone who wants the sector to fracture.” Sinéad Butters, chief executive, Aspire

“I think what we have got to avoid is playing into the hands of anyone who wants the sector to fracture,” she states.

Ms Butters will be choosing her battles - and one of those is going to be campaigning hard for a change of policy to the application of the cap on Local Housing Allowance to supported housing, which she calls “a travesty for vulnerable people”.

She doesn’t pick this as the number one policy she would like to change though (that’s the bedroom tax) because she says she is hopeful the policy will be reversed. Nonetheless, she says, “It’s a massive issue for Placeshapers.” Just how big though? Could it be a survival issue for some members?

“For some of them yes, without a doubt,” she states. Because turnover of supported housing is higher than general needs housing, she says that the cap - implemented on new tenancies from 2018 - will have a big impact “very quickly” both on landlords’ ability to continue to provide services and on the lives of vulnerable people such as those with learning disabilities or victims of domestic violence.

“Specialist providers will have to close schemes and they won’t be able to build new ones,” she says. “And I just don’t know where people will go. It [the motivation for lobbying on the issue] is not about self-preservation, it is about having people who will use the service who will have nowhere to go.”

The government has said it will set aside Discretionary Housing Payments to contribute towards the shortfall, but Ms Butters feels it doesn't cut the mustard to leave vulnerable people dependent on the "vagaries" of a "budgetary donation".

Despite the challenges, Ms Butters sees one of Placeshapers' key roles as being to help keep the sector looking at the positives. This means getting "our people excited by what we do again after all this transformation" and "showing others we can go through pain and carry on doing the things that matter to local communities". The hard work is just starting.