

## Setting Up a Tenants' and Residents' Association

### Who is this guide for?

This Information Sheet has mainly been written for tenants and residents of social housing landlords although most of the information given can equally be applied to any type of tenant group (e.g. of private landlords) and owner-occupiers, leaseholders etc. It should also be of use to housing and community development workers, who have a role in setting up tenants' groups.

### What is a tenants' and residents' association (TRA)?

"A TRA is a group of people living in an area, block or street who have come together to take up issues of common concern in relation to their housing, community and general environment".

#### TPAS definition

"Voluntary body of tenants representing the views of its membership and local residents to their landlord, the local authority and any other relevant agencies".

#### CIH definition

Many groups call themselves tenants' associations or residents' associations, depending on who their membership covers, e.g. tenants, council leaseholders,

owner-occupiers etc.

This Information Sheet refers to tenants' and residents' associations (TRAs), but you will need to bear in mind that the information applies to any type of association.

### Why start a TRA?

There are many reasons why people living in one area may get together to form an association. For example:

- To campaign for something (e.g. a better repairs service, play facilities, somewhere to meet etc.)
- To campaign against something (e.g. the closure of local facilities, problems with traffic).
- To gain a greater voice than you would have as an individual, when talking to the council or landlord about things you would like to see changed.
- To arrange outings and social events (e.g. a coach trip, a street party, bingo or keep-fit etc.)
- To gain a sense of 'community', by meeting and helping other people.



- To keep people in the area informed of all the issues that affect them.
- To get involved with what other groups may be doing.

## How to set up a TRA

### Step one - getting everyone's views

The first step is to discover whether there is sufficient interest amongst the tenants and residents in your area to make the formation of an association possible. You need to talk to as many people as you can before doing anything else. This can be achieved in a variety of ways, including:

- Door knocking, over the fence chats etc.
- Going to the shops that your community uses (e.g. post offices, launderettes, local shopping precinct).
- Going to other places where people meet socially e.g. pubs, community centres and clubs (NB your local Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) will be able to give you names of the various voluntary organisations working within your community). See below for details.
- Going to religious centres in the area - churches, mosques etc.
- Going to places children and young people attend e.g. schools, nurseries, playgroups or youth clubs (NB. your local CVS or council will be able to help you with contact details).

If you do manage to meet and talk to people in all these different places, you will be able to get an idea of how much support there is for starting a group.

## What do you want from people?

Do not be put off by people's initial reactions or comments. Although some people will be enthusiastic, many will be non-committal and some may be downright hostile. Many residents may have a variety of reasons why they do not want to initially be involved in the group, but if you do set up and continue to provide everyone within the area with information and the opportunity to become involved, more people will normally start to take part.

As long as a core of people expresses an interest in setting up a group, this is all you need.

What you are asking for initially is:

- Whether the issues that are affecting the community are the same issues you are concerned about.
- An agreement that it would be a good idea to set up a group.
- An agreement to come to an initial meeting or an interest in knowing the outcome of an initial meeting. You only need around six people to attend the first meeting to have enough to set up a group.

It does not help to be too pushy, but it always helps to reassure people that attending a meeting does not mean they will be roped into doing anything specific!

Gathering opinions can be a time consuming process and will need confidence and a thick skin. Obviously, if there are already a few of you who know each other and have the same aim, then it would make sense to do this together, and, if possible find others to help.



## Step two - talk to your landlord

All council and housing association landlords have (by law or regulation) to encourage resident involvement within their organisations. One good way of doing this is to encourage the setting up of good, representative tenants' and residents' associations. You may find, therefore, that when you talk to them they may already have systems in place to help you. For example they may provide:

- Help with leaflets, photocopying, typing etc.
- Help with translations, interpreters, etc.
- A starter-pack for you.
- A meeting place for your first meeting.
- Training in setting up a group.

They will also give you an idea of any criteria you would need to meet before they will recognise your group. This could include:

- Proving you have tried to reach all sections of the community within your area, including those with another language, young people etc.
- Ensuring your aims and objectives for the group are non-political and are based on trying to improve the quality of life for the people in your area.

Some landlords give grants to new and existing groups, but only if they adopt the rules given by the landlord for official recognition. They may also have a member of staff who can actually work with you to help set up the group.

It is obviously extremely useful if you are starting a group to know from the beginning exactly what help your landlord is prepared to give you, so make sure you speak to them sooner rather than later!

## Step three - planning the first public meeting

Once you have talked to everyone in your area and have got a firm commitment from enough people to attend a first meeting, this now has to be arranged. This could normally be in someone's home. Use the people who have shown an initial interest to plan the group's first public meeting.

During this initial planning meeting someone will need to act as 'chair'. Even if a meeting is informal, someone needs to make sure the meeting keeps to the point. People will feel that the meeting has been worthwhile and has achieved something if ideas have been discussed carefully and decisions made. The person chairing needs to make sure everyone has a chance to contribute.

Someone else needs to take notes of the main decisions made at the meeting and who has agreed to do what. It is also useful to keep an attendance sheet with people's contact details for future reference.

### Reasons for the planning meeting

When you meet, you need to agree what you want to achieve in the public meeting and how you can achieve it. This could include:

- Getting agreement for the formation of the group
- Naming the group
- Electing a committee
- Deciding on the aims of the group

The first public meeting will be the occasion when you will launch your association publicly so you will want to plan it properly.

By the end of the first planning meeting you may already have decided to form the



group and have made decisions about what issues to tackle initially. However, the next step must be a public meeting to give people the opportunity to come and say what they think.

If you decide to miss out on a public meeting because you think you have got everything sorted at this stage you run the risk of assuming that the few of you actually represent everyone's views in the area, and this may not necessarily be the case.

## Step four - running your first public meeting

This is the occasion when you will launch the TRA publicly, so you will want to run it properly.

### Publicity

Once you know what you want to achieve at the public meeting, make sure you make this clear in your adverts for the meeting. Tell people what the meeting is for, but don't overload them with too much information - you mainly want to tell people where and when the meeting will be held. Try to get people curious and interested – don't bore with too much detail!

You will also need to make sure people know how to contact you if they want more information.

### Date and Time of meeting

You will need to think about whom you want to get to the meeting. Do you just want local residents or do you also want to get along people from other community groups, or local councillors etc.? If you want everyone from the area to have the opportunity to come (which will include young people, elderly people, single parents with young children etc.) then you will need to think carefully about where and

when to hold the meeting. Arranging a date and time to suit everyone will be quite difficult if some people are working, have children to look after or do not like coming out at night etc., but with thought you will get the best place and time to suit the most people.

### Place of meeting

The place of the meeting could be a room in a local community centre, a school or church hall or a meeting room provided by your landlord. You need to make sure the room is easy for people who have difficulty walking or who use wheelchairs.

It is not a good idea to hold a meeting in a place where alcohol is served as this prevents young people and certain people from various religions from being able to attend.

### The agenda

Make sure you have prepared an agenda and have agreed who is chairing the meeting and who is making notes. The main items on the agenda are to get support to formally set up a group and to get formal agreement on who is to be Chair, Secretary and Treasurer for the first year.

### **EXAMPLE** **Anywhere Estate Public Meeting** **Agenda**

1. *Welcome and introduction*
2. *Apologies*
3. *Why we need a tenants' and residents' association*
4. *Choice of name*
5. *Membership requirements and any other regulations*
6. *Election of a Committee*
  - *Chair*
  - *Vice Chair (if required)*
  - *Secretary*



- Treasurer

7. Plan of action
8. Date of first meeting of the Committee
9. Date of the next general meeting of members
10. Any other business

Although the items discussed at the public meeting will cover issues discussed at the initial planning meeting, the main aim of the public meeting is to see if there is enough support in the area for the idea of setting up of a group, and to get agreement on what your initial priorities are on what to do as a group.

The public meeting should be seen as the start of the association. Don't be disappointed if attendance at the meeting is poor. Although you may be enthusiastic and have worked hard to organise the meeting, many people will be very uncertain about whether or not to join in. It may take some time for people to become confident enough to take part, but this should happen eventually.

### **EXAMPLE**

#### **Step by step planning list for arranging a public meeting**

1. Arrange your initial planning meeting - this can be in someone's home.
2. Agree an agenda for the public meeting, and arrange a date and place where the meeting will be held.
3. If you have decided to invite representatives from other bodies e.g. the council - contact them and check they can attend.
4. Book a venue for the meeting.
5. Decide how to publicise the meeting, for example, prepare a leaflet and arrange for it to be printed, and/or prepare a poster to advertise the meeting.
6. Arrange the distribution of the leaflet and/or posters (Give people at least one week's notice of the meeting).
7. Contact local newspapers or local radio

stations to publicise the meeting if you think this is necessary.

#### 8. Organise the meeting: -

- agree an agenda and check it with the person chairing the meeting
- check any motions to be proposed at the meeting
- make sure you have decided on who is going to take notes at the meeting
- decide who will record the names and addresses of everyone who attends the meeting.

On the day - get there early and make sure the room is open and the furniture is laid out as you want it.

### **After the public meeting**

If the public meeting has agreed to set up an association for the area, your next step is to get yourself properly organised. Our other publication on running a tenants' and residents' association takes you on to the next stages.

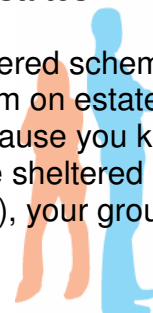
Always make sure the issues you take up or the projects you agree to work on reflect the interests of your members.

Don't forget to inform your landlord that you have agreed to set up a group, giving them the name of the group and the name of someone they can contact.

### **Frequently asked questions**

#### **How does setting up a TRA in sheltered housing, supported housing, high-rise etc. differ from general estates?**

Setting up a group in sheltered schemes or high-rise is no different from on estates. In some ways it is easier because you know exactly what 'area' (i.e. the sheltered scheme or the tower block), your group will



cover. Also the fact that most schemes will have community rooms helps as this is obviously an ideal location for your 'public meeting'. It is still, however, just as important to get to everyone individually (i.e. by door-knocking etc.). Don't just assume a leaflet on the notice board will do.

In sheltered schemes it also helps to inform your scheme manager or warden of your intentions. They, as landlord, may be able to provide you with support.

Many supported housing schemes have very small numbers of tenants. Even so, there is no reason why, for example, five supported housing tenants in a property should not set up a 'group'. Obviously, in this case, they will make up the committee and as such be involved in all the meetings.

### **What legal regulations do TRAs have to follow?**

TRAs are not governed by any legal requirements and can be informal or formal. It is a good idea for a formal group to write a constitution, as this states the aims and objectives of the group, but again, a constitution is not a legal requirement.

Many landlords, however, require groups to follow criteria they have laid down in order for the group to be recognised and receive grants. This normally includes having a constitution.

Some associations can choose to become limited companies or charities. If you want to take on a formal structure, then you will be governed by the relevant regulations.

### **Will we need to set up a bank account?**

It is useful for a new group to set up a bank account (and this is usually a requirement

of landlords that give starter grants to groups). You will need to make sure there are at least two signatories for signing cheques. Sometimes, especially with newly set-up groups, two members of the same family may be officers of the committee. In this case it would be advisable (and also common sense) to make sure only one person from that family had the right to sign cheques and to make someone else from the committee the other cheque signatory.

### **Will we need insurance?**

Your group is not required to have insurance. However, you will need public liability insurance for any formal outings or events you organise. If you are given premises or equipment, you will also need to insure them.

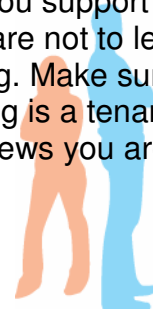
### **Is there a limit to the number of members a group can have?**

A group can be as small or as large as you want it to be. For example, it could cover a small sheltered housing scheme, one street or the whole of an estate. It is up to the tenants and residents to decide the area they want the group to cover.

### **Should we invite the landlord to the public meeting?**

That should be your own choice. Some tenants are uneasy about inviting councillors or housing staff to the meeting because they think they might tend to steer things their way.

If you think this might happen then don't invite them! If you do decide to invite them (because they are giving you support and you feel obliged to) take care not to let them dominate the meeting. Make sure the person chairing the meeting is a tenant and it is the group members' views you are obtaining.



You may want to invite your landlord to the meeting just to give advice or information, but make sure they know they have been invited for that purpose only.

### **What if the landlord wants to put housing staff on the TRA committee?**

Good landlords should not want to do this, as they recognise that too much 'pushing' from outside may hinder the group from developing at its own pace.

Neither should good landlords make this a criteria for receiving recognition and support. You will need to be assertive as a group and make sure that representatives from your landlord only attend meetings by invitation from the group.

### **Can a councillor who is also a tenant be a member of the group?**

That will be the choice of the group. We advise that they should be allowed to be members of the group, but not a member of the committee and that they are made aware that they attend meetings as a tenant and not as the landlord. There is nothing stopping you from stating in your rules that councillors cannot be elected onto the committee.

### **Can a person who works for the landlord, but who is also a tenant (e.g. a caretaker) be a member of the association?**

This is similar to the question above and it is up to your group to decide. We advise that they should be allowed to be members of the group, but not a member of the committee (because of potential conflict of interest) and that they be made aware that they attend meetings as a tenant and not on behalf of the landlord. There is nothing stopping you from stating in your rules that anyone employed by your landlord cannot be elected onto the committee.

### **Should leaseholders or other residents in the area be members of the association?**

If the group is going to deal with social and environmental issues as well as housing management issues then it is best that everyone living in the area covered by the group is allowed to be a member. This is why many groups now call themselves 'tenants' and residents' associations'.

There can be a problem sometimes if your landlord provides grants. Some local authority and housing association landlords will only give grants to groups if they can show that over 51% of group members are tenants. You will need to check this with your landlord.

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