

Running a Tenants' Association

Introduction

This Information Sheet follows on from the TPAS information Sheet on 'Setting up a Tenants' Association'. We hope it will be useful for all social housing tenants' and residents' groups.

There are no particular rules on how tenants' groups should be run, but you will have to make some decisions on how to organise, to ensure that your group works effectively and fairly. You may want to start with questions like the ones listed below.

The Committee

Do we need one?
How many should be on our committee?
What are their jobs/roles?

Meetings

How often should we meet?
How should we run our meetings?
What topics should we cover?

Involvement

How can we make sure people get, and stay, involved?

The Constitution

Do we need one?
What rules should we have?
These are the areas we cover below.

The Committee

The Committee is elected by the members to carry out the work of the organisation. The Committee organises general meetings of all the members, and the group's Annual General Meeting, and must carry out the actions agreed at these meetings.

The Committee will probably also make decisions where general members are not present. In this case these decisions must be reported back to the members.

There is no set way of organising a committee but there are ways of working that are more common and more useful than others. Try and make sure that the Committee represents all the people in your association - men, women, old, young, black, white, disabled people etc.

Here are some guidelines...

Officers of the Committee

The officers of any committee are:

- Chair
- Secretary
- Treasurer



The Chair

The Chair is the person elected for a fixed term to:

- a. guide the association to achieve its aims
- b. chair the meetings of the association

How is the Chair elected?

Your constitution should outline this, but normally the Chair (and all the other officers) are elected at an Annual General Meeting (AGM). Sometimes, Chairs are elected by the Committee members.

A good Chair needs to have:

- Patience and tact in dealing with other people
- The ability to command respect
- The ability to keep people under control during meetings
- The ability to be as impartial as possible when discussing topics (even if you have a particular interest in what is being discussed!)

The Chair has to make sure that decisions at meetings are made in a proper manner. They also normally act as spokesperson or leader of the group, so need the skills to do that. (However, this role can be spread around the Committee if they wish).

Outside of meetings they should:

- be aware of all activities carried out by the association
- ensure other officers are carrying out their tasks
- prepare agendas for meetings (with the Secretary)

In meetings they should:

- make sure each item on the agenda is discussed, and a decision is made and

recorded

- make sure everyone gets an opportunity to contribute to the discussion

The Chair is the person who makes sure things get done - not the person who does everything. Above all they are responsible for the smooth, and fair, running of the organisation.

What about a Vice-Chair?

It is also useful to elect a vice-chair. There will be times when the Chair is not available. (However good a Chair is - no one can be expected to never get ill or never take a holiday!)

Having a vice-chair can also come in useful for chairing a meeting when the Chair may have a particular interest in the subject being discussed and wants to put their own point of view.

The Secretary

The Secretary's main duties include:

- taking minutes of meetings - that means taking a written record of decisions made
- letting people know when and where the next meeting is and what will be discussed
- helping the Chair to prepare agendas for meetings
- writing and receiving letters on behalf of the Association
- keeping members informed of what correspondence has been sent out and received
- keeping a record of membership, important phone numbers and so on



Some of these jobs may be divided amongst other people. You may want to have a minutes secretary, a correspondence secretary, a membership secretary. It just depends on the size of your group, the amount of time people have available, the skills people have, and what people like doing.

The Secretary's job is to keep people informed - so that they feel involved and are able to join in what the group does.

Preparing for a meeting

The Secretary should give adequate notice of a meeting and make sure that agendas, minutes and other relevant papers are sent out prior to any meetings. What is included on the agenda and the order of the meeting needs to be decided with the Chair.

The Secretary should also try to think what people may ask at the meeting and bring any relevant papers that might be useful (e.g. minutes of previous meetings).

Taking minutes is one of the most important aspects of the job, and often the most daunting. Take notes during the meeting, draft the minutes up soon after the meeting, check them with the Chair and then write them up properly. They should not be a record of everything said at the meeting or the Secretary's personal feelings!

Minutes should:

- state the name of your association, date, time and place of meeting
- include a list of those present at the meeting
- follow the agenda
- be clear, short, easy to read and to understand
- include details of all decisions made,

and the key arguments leading to that decision

- have an Action column stating who is responsible for carrying out decisions made
- state date, time and place of next meeting
- be written up and sent out soon after the meeting

The Secretary should also keep a full set of minutes for future reference.

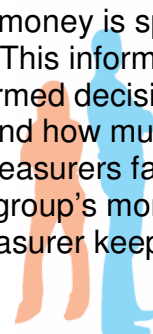
The Treasurer

The Treasurer is the person with overall responsibility for the association's finances. The amount of work involved will vary according to the size of the organisation and the amount of money you receive - but the principles and duties are the same.

The Treasurer should:

- open a bank account
- pay money received into the bank, keep a record of money received and issue receipts
- pay bills and keep a record of money spent
- keep petty cash and a petty cash account book for day-to-day expenditure
- keep an account book of all money going in and out of the organisation
- prepare statements to the committee and for the Annual General Meeting

The last point is particularly important. All members should know how much money the organisation has, how money is spent, and where it's come from. This information helps the group make informed decisions about what it can spend, and how much money is needed. Some treasurers fall into the trap of acting as if the group's money is their own - it isn't. The Treasurer keeps



accounts, advises, and keeps people informed of the financial situation. The Committee makes the decisions on spending money.

Usually, the Treasurer is one of several members who can sign cheques for the association. They should never be the only person who signs the cheques. A good treasurer will be keen to make sure at least one other committee member also has to sign any cheques they write. It is good practice for groups to have written financial guidelines that cover things like who can sign cheques, who can have petty cash, how much at any one time, who is the contact for the bank etc. A good treasurer will welcome these as they will help them to do their job better.

Other Jobs

You may want to have more people on your committee. It all depends on what you are trying to achieve, and what skills your members have. Other officers you may choose to have are:

Fundraiser

responsible for raising money

Social Secretary

responsible for organising social activities

Press Officer

responsible for approaching the press, radio, TV etc, to get publicity for the group

So, decide what jobs need doing and how many people you need to do them. Encourage people to volunteer by discussing and agreeing what the job involves and what people need to know in order to be able to do it. Remember that people can and will learn how to do things they've not done before. Training, advice and support can make a job that, at first,

seemed impossible, quite easy.

The Committee as a Group of People

A committee is a group of people working together towards a common goal. It is a team of people with a mixture of skills. This sounds simple, but committees can and do run into problems. Differences of opinion are natural, and necessary to make the group think about what it is doing. The best approach is to accept that conflicts or problems may emerge and try to face them as soon as they occur.

Look at this list of characteristics of 'well' and 'badly' behaved committee members. If you identify any of the second list in your committee, try to work out why people may be acting as they are and think how the situation could be changed for the better.

A well behaved committee member:

- attends meetings regularly and arrives on time
- makes useful suggestions at meetings
- keeps comments short and to the point
- keeps in mind the goals of the organisation
- listens to others and does not interrupt
- supports others, helping people without taking over
- does what they say they'll do
- abides by the group's decisions

A badly behaved committee member:

- rarely attends meetings
- arrives late at meetings is disruptive or aggressive at meetings - interrupts, shouts etc
- doesn't listen to others
- talks too much
- doesn't do what they have promised to



do

- keeps information to themselves
- doesn't let others do anything
- makes people feel they don't know or can't do anything properly

There are also people on committees who don't appear to be doing or saying much. This may be because they do not have the information they need, or they simply lack confidence. Information and encouragement is probably what they need. Always try to use people's strengths rather than criticise their weaknesses. Remember, everyone has something to offer.

Meetings

If you're part of an association, you will be attending, organising, and running meetings - so it's important to get it right. Whether it's a committee meeting, general meeting or Annual General Meeting, the principles are the same. Meetings are for passing on information, discussing issues, and making decisions. The success of any meeting depends on:

- having a clear agenda (that means knowing what you're there for)
- good chairing (that means someone making sure the agenda is followed, decisions are made, and a good atmosphere is maintained)

Meetings should be interesting and enjoyable. Most importantly, people should feel comfortable. Knowing who everyone is helps, so make sure people introduce themselves. A comfortable room with comfortable chairs also helps. Rows of chairs can be off-putting - when people sit in a circle the atmosphere feels much less formal.

The Agenda

The agenda must be logical. Short items should be dealt with first, with items requiring discussion and decision-making later. When planning the agenda think about the timescale and importance of each item. So 'Matters Arising' (things occurring from the last minutes) shouldn't take ages. Each important matter should appear on the agenda as a separate item. Equally 'Any Other Business' at the end of the meeting shouldn't take long - it should only be for points of information. The smooth running of a meeting depends on planning.

An example of how you might prepare an agenda:

1. Minutes of last meeting	7.30
2. Matters arising	7.40
3. 1st agenda item	7.45
4. 2nd agenda item	8.10
5. 3rd agenda item	8.30
6. Any other business	8.50
7. date and time of next meeting	8.55

The inclusion of times helps people to keep to the agenda, and lets people know when they're going to be able to go home. It's up to the Chair to stick to these timings, or get agreement from the meeting if they're going to be changed.

Good Chairing

Good chairing is very often the key to making meetings work. The chairperson has a variety of roles:

- to introduce and summarise the purpose of the meeting
- to introduce each item on the agenda, giving the necessary background



- information
- to summarise the points made in the discussions and encourage decisionmaking
- to stop people talking for too long or going off the point
- to make sure everyone in the meeting gets a chance to participate
- to be positive, and help the group find solutions

The main aim is to make sure the meeting achieves what it sets out to achieve in as fair and friendly a way as possible. Perhaps the best way of learning how to run meetings is to think about how successful your meetings are at present (if you are already holding meetings). Bad meetings are the sign of a poor organisation, and will put people off.

So ask yourself these questions:

1. Do your meetings start on time?
Yes/No
2. Do most people attend?
Yes/No
3. Do you discuss the items on the agenda?
Yes/No
4. Do you discuss items not on the agenda?
Yes/No
5. Do you make decisions on items needing decisions?
Yes/No
6. Do you finish on time?
Yes/No
7. Are issues properly prepared and reported on?
Yes/No

8. Do a few people dominate?
Yes/No

9. Does everyone get a chance to contribute?
Yes/No

10. Do people behave properly towards each other?
Yes/No

You get 10 out of 10 if you answer Yes to all but questions 4 and 8!

Of course no group is perfect, but you can try. You should find a number of benefits from your efforts - more involvement all round, better attended meetings, a more effective group and more enjoyable meetings.

Keeping People Involved

Once you have set up, you have your committee members and they know their roles, you need to make sure you know what you want to do as a group.

Some groups start up purely to carry out social activities, some because they are concerned with one particular group of people e.g. the elderly, but most groups will have set up because of a range of issues affecting all the people in the area.

People are the most important resource your group has. The biggest task is to get and keep people involved. This doesn't just happen by chance. You don't want your group to be a clique of activists, nor a 'one-man band'. Here are some ways of preventing these things from happening.

Define your Aims

Make sure your organisation is clear about what it is trying to do, such as getting your



estate modernised. This may take years to achieve so you also need short term aims - things that you can work towards day-to-day and have a good chance of achieving quite soon. In this way you can regularly have successes.

You can always be helping people with repair problems or you can organise regular children's trips. People will see the point of staying involved and will enjoy things more if they know what they're working towards and can see results.

If your group had set up because of a number of issues or problems it may be a good idea to do a survey of tenants to give you an idea of what to prioritise. A survey is also a good way of promoting your group in the area, and the results of a survey can be a useful tool when dealing with councillors or your landlord.

Share Tasks

A lot of work is involved in running an association, and jobs are best shared. If too few people are doing all the work they may get tired and fed up, and other people may feel excluded and unimportant. Sharing workloads and responsibility is a way of preventing a few members from getting discouraged, and ensuring all members feel involved. It will also mean your group gets more done and is more successful.

As a check, list all the jobs that need doing (such as writing letters, delivering newsletters, representing your group at meetings, making phone calls, booking rooms etc.), and put a name by the person who does that job. You'll easily see whether your group does share out the work or not.

Keep in Touch

If people are to feel involved and encouraged to contribute they must know what the group is doing and what decisions it has made. Send out regular newsletters and leaflets, and generally let people know what is going on. People may rarely attend meetings but as long as they feel a part of the group they may at some stage offer support. Try knocking on everyone's door at least once a year, and organising regular public meetings and events.

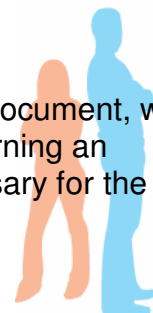
Just because people don't attend meetings doesn't mean they're not interested. Maybe they don't want to come out at night, or can't find a baby sitter, or haven't been able to read or understand your leaflets. If you keep in touch with people you'll find out about these things and be able to organise in a way that involves more people.

Have Fun

Try to make your group enjoyable. Being in a tenants' association is hard work. But it is possible to get satisfaction from the social side of working together with people, and also pleasure from achieving your aims. Even if you just break for tea or coffee half way through your meetings, you are creating a friendly atmosphere where people can chat and get to know each other. Social events also help. No one will stay long in a group where they have no friends and never have a good time. They'll find something else to do.

The Constitution

A constitution is a formal document, which sets out the rules for governing an organisation and is necessary for the following reasons:-



- to ensure an organisation's aims are clear and agreed by its members
- to provide mechanisms for making decisions and resolving disputes
- to gain credibility with the landlord and funders
- to clarify the lines of responsibility of the committee members
- to ensure accountability
- to enable an organisation to take advantage of the benefits of charitable status (a written constitution is needed in order to register as a charity or obtain certain types of funding)
- to enable an organisation to affiliate to other agencies e.g. your local Council for Voluntary Service, TPAS etc.

If you are an informal group you may not need a constitution. However, most groups need a more formal structure, and in order for your group to be taken seriously, by both the tenants you want to represent and by your landlord, a constitution will be necessary.

A constitution therefore helps you to clarify three main things:

- a. who you represent
- b. what your group's aims are
- c. how your group is run

It is common for landlords to insist that groups have a constitution before they will give them any money, apart from small grants to get going. The constitution should be the basis of your organisation and be set out for everyone to see.

Once you have decided that you need a constitution, the next stage is to work out:

- a. the aims of your group
- b. the way in which your group is organised
- c. the rules of your group
- d. safeguards to make sure your group is

run in a democratic and fair way

You should always tailor a constitution to meet the needs of your own group, not just copy someone else's. By all means look at other groups' constitutions as a guide, but always write your own.

Conclusion

Why not regularly sit back and think about how well your group is running. Ask yourself:

- What are we trying to achieve?
- What are we doing to get there?
- What have we done in the last six months?
- When did we last send out a newsletter?
- Do people come to our meetings?
- Do members enjoy meetings?
- Do people say anything when they come to our meetings?
- Are as many people involved now as they were a year ago?

Asking questions like this at least helps you identify what your problems and successes are - then you can start to improve. Always keep in mind that there are more important things than how many people attend your meetings. While you want people to attend committee meetings, general meetings and

AGMs, members can take part in many other ways. Chatting to people regularly about what's going on and listening to what they have to say is as important as getting them to attend meetings.

GOOD LUCK!



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