



Tenant Participation Advisory Service



Office of the
Deputy Prime Minister

Creating sustainable communities

information sheet

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Involving and
Representing the
Community

A large, faint, light yellow watermark of the TPAS logo is positioned at the bottom of the page. It consists of the letters 'TPAS' in a bold, sans-serif font, with a swoosh arching over them from the left side.

TPAS

Involving and Representing the Community

Introduction

Tenants' and residents' associations can transform housing estates from near "no-go" areas into desirable places to live. They are the essential ingredients in successful housing developments, making them into communities.

Often it is down to "the few" to act on behalf of the rest, with the attendant danger of not representing the community view. This Information Sheet sets out to clearly establish ways in which tenants' and residents' association committees can make sure they are genuinely and credibly representing the views of their community and involving more people.

The keys to success are organisation, communication and partnership. These three attributes are intertwined throughout this activity and each complements the others - they are the triple strands that bind the community together.

This Information Sheet is set out under these headings, using the tenants and residents as the central focus, and drawing services to them as the end users and main force for influencing their development.

When written down it seems to be an awful lot of things to do, in reality once set up it is quick and easy as different individuals carry out the necessary jobs.

Some of the tasks described may need skills that members of the association do not think they possess. Most people can do most of the things described given adequate training and this is usually freely available to tenants, being provided by the landlord. The key is to ASK!

Being involved in a tenants' and residents' association is rewarding. It enables people to work together to improve their neighbourhood, builds people up with new skills and confidence and produces a positive community spirit. It should be enjoyable and full of fun for all concerned.

Organisation

To be successful any tenants' and residents' association needs to be well organised because:

- It is more efficient - you get more done with the limited amount of volunteer time available.
- It is easier to run.
- It establishes credibility with the tenants, residents, landlord and other service providers, making the association's voice stronger.

A sound foundation:

Like any structure the association will only be as good as its foundation, in this case a

sound, workable constitution which reflects the reality of the area and the times. A constitution is a written set of rules, agreed by the members of the association, showing how it is run.

The constitution needs to be based on:

- Community support.
- Accountability.
- Openness.
- Transparency.
- Equal opportunities.
- Democratic principals.
- Including everyone.
- Independence of any political or other influence.

Constitutions need to be clearly worded so that anyone can understand them. There should be a clear statement of the objectives of the association and a map showing which streets are included in its area.

The numbers of people on the general committee and who they are (i.e. tenants, residents, others) should be clearly stated. Details of the Annual General Meeting, qualification of voting members present, quorum (the minimum number of people needed to hold a meeting), when the meetings should be held and how the membership is informed should all be contained within the constitution, and much more.

Model constitutions have been produced by different bodies, including TPAS who would be glad to advise groups on request. Your tenant participation officer will also be able to help you develop an acceptable

constitution that will be recognised by your landlord.

Representation:

Housing estates are now made up not only of tenants of the local authority or housing association but also people who now own their own homes. They too form part of the local community and their voice also needs to be heard within the association. Communities should seek to be unified. Anything which divides people living close together can only be a negative influence on daily life, so inclusiveness is vital.

Membership:

It is always best, if possible, to have a signed up membership list that is up-to-date. With the aid of a simple computer programme this is no longer the difficult chore it used to be. Once set up the list will provide real evidence of membership to the landlord and the basis of communication for the association.

This is better than the catch all "everyone who lives here is a member" approach as it shows that at least people have taken the trouble to sign up as an act of will rather than by accident.

Finance:

Clear financial control needs to be set down within the constitution and as a policy document which shows:

- The role and powers of the treasurer.

- How many and who the bank signatories are.
- Limits on expenditure.
- Allowable expenses.
- Independent auditors.
- Start and finish of the association's banking/accounting year.

Financial records should always be up to date, with receipts obtained and filed for every purchase and bill. There should be committee resolutions for major purchases used as the authority for the expenditure of the money.

A written financial statement should be produced for every general committee meeting and an annual set of accounts for the whole membership presented at the Annual General Meeting, having been audited by an independent person.

By doing it this way everyone can see how the money is handled and where it goes - this gives confidence to the committee, credibility with the landlord and the continued support of the membership.

Record keeping:

Before any meetings are held an agenda should be produced. It should contain the main headings to be discussed along with the time, date and place of the meeting.

At the meeting a record of attendance should be signed by all who take part together with the start and finish time and details of who chaired it.

Minutes, which are a written record of what

happened, should be kept. These need to be clear, to the point and contain the main issues discussed. Any decisions which are made need to be recorded and include who suggested or proposed it, who backed or seconded it and the number voting in favour and against it (where this happens).

The minutes should be typed and circulated to the members of the meeting as soon as possible after it has taken place, while it is still fresh in their minds. At the start of the next meeting the minutes should be read and confirmed as a true record or altered if there are mistakes or disputes with the record.

Records should be kept of telephone and other messages received in a file for the purpose, together with letters and replies in date order.

Arrangement and conduct of meetings:

Meetings of all kinds should be well planned, advertised in advance, and located at a place and time that most people can attend. People who work need to be able to get home first before attending a weekday meeting.

Some form of childcare arrangements should be made for people with children. If there is a need, interpreters should be provided and invitations printed in common community languages.

All meetings should be conducted in an orderly and respectful manner. Many associations have a set of ground rules for the conduct of meetings that they display at

the start of the meeting and are referred to in the opening comments from the chair.

The ability to conduct a meeting is a real skill that needs to be acquired by whoever is the chair. Everyone must be given the opportunity to be heard, not just the loudest. People should be encouraged to speak one at a time, avoiding personal attacks and abuse, and concentrating on the issue under discussion. All comments should be directed to the chair in the third person.

Only people who are entitled to vote should be allowed to do so. This may mean a secret paper vote on sensitive issues.

Communication

The basis of all communication is information. The association needs up to date information that is accurate and easily accessible. The danger is information overload - having so much that it is difficult to access that which is needed at the time.

Basic information that every association will need frequent and immediate access to can be listed as: -

Local landlord and service provider information:

Name, address, telephone, fax and e-mail details together with local office location and availability of:

- Area Housing Manager.
- Head Office of housing provider (could be the Town Hall or Housing Association Main Office).

- Police.
- Highways Department.
- Street Cleaning Service.
- Street Lighting Section.
- Grounds Maintenance.
- Repairs Service.
- Social Services.
- Refuse Collection Service.
- Dog Wardens.
- Abandoned Car Office.
- Fire Service.

It is very handy to have a chart showing which housing officers are responsible for individual aspects of the service, with their direct telephone number and e-mail address.

All of these services publish public documents that give details of what they do, what can be expected and how to access the service. Copies of these will be supplied on request and form a handy reference guide to all of the local services listed above.

Many, if not all, of these public services now contain service level statements and agreements that contain any rights and compensation available if they fail to perform at the required standard. They will also contain details of any complaints procedures and how to use them.

The landlord will also supply a copy of the following:

- Housing policies.
- Any agreements - Compacts, Estate Agreements etc.
- Tenancy details.
- Programmes of major repairs, improvements, maintenance etc.

- Updates on the law, which are relevant to the services provided.

Keeping up to date:

Publications

A good way of keeping up-to-date is to look at a weekly housing journal like 'Housing Today' or 'Inside Housing'. By scanning through these publications on a weekly basis group members can be aware of what is going on throughout the country in social housing. If the group cannot afford these, copies can be found in reference libraries - perhaps a job for a retired member who has a real interest in housing.

The Internet

There are lists of web sites that give good information and are easily accessible:

- The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister - Housing.
- The local authority.
- The housing provider - housing association - trust - etc.
- Federation of tenants' associations - local.
- National associations of tenants' associations.
- Approved Section 16 Agencies - TPAS and others.

Communication is a two way affair:

Having established an information base, the association committee now needs to be able to speak to its membership and hear what

the members are saying on different issues.

There are different ways of doing this, and most groups try combinations of all of them:

- Public meeting.
- Focus group.
- Newsletter.
- The news media - press and local radio.
- Events - open days, fun nights, galas, drop-ins etc.
- Surveys.

Public meetings

To tell people about a public meeting where they can hear and receive information and voice their opinion, use either a notice on a board or put a leaflet through every door.

It can be difficult to get a significant number of people to attend a public meeting unless there is some burning central issue that is usually contentious. Even under these circumstances the turn out can be disappointing but this is a valid form of communication which gives an indication of the local view.

Regular but well spaced public meetings on important local issues keep the work of the association uppermost in the mind of the membership and do provide a public face for the organisation.

Focus groups

To gain a view of public opinion in any area, a carefully selected group of people reflecting the balance of the local community is brought together for a couple of hours to

consider the issues and express an opinion. Increasingly used by commercial companies and political parties, it provides a pointer towards public opinion that is relatively easy and cheap to organise.

Newsletters

A newsletter can go through every letterbox on the estate and carry the same message to everyone. If coupled with a phone number or free post reply slip, opinion can be invited. Experience shows that most people will read the information but relatively few will send in an opinion.

A regular newsletter keeps the membership informed of current affairs that affect everyone on the estate and acts as a notice board for social events and special offers negotiated by the association for its members.

As a method of keeping the membership together and giving substance to the work of the committee, it is hard to beat. Newsletters do not have to be long or impressive to work well. A single sheet of A4 paper printed on both sides will suffice, so long as it is clear, in large type, factual and regular. People appreciate being well informed by their own organisation, it helps make them feel part of a community.

The news media - press and local radio

These organisations will certainly publish a story but as it is reported through another's eyes it may not convey the whole of the message in a balanced way. There is also no

guarantee that the people on the estate will read or hear it. However, the local media do have a role to play when the association wants to gain a wider audience for its message.

Events - open days, fun nights, galas, drop-ins etc.

These provide the opportunity to meet the membership in an informal and enjoyable atmosphere. They give a non-confrontational face to the work of the association whilst giving and gaining information from members.

Surveys

Quick house to house surveys completed at the doorstep are an effective way of obtaining the opinion of the membership. The drawback is that they are time consuming and are sometimes only conducted on a percentage basis of the membership or on every house in certain streets affected by change.

Partnership

As with most things in life, people are better working together than alone, the end result is usually improved performance.

Partnership in its true form is the co-operation of two or more bodies to fulfil a common end. Ideally these should be equal partners, treating each other with respect. Each should bring whatever it has to accomplish to the task and by mutual agreement wholeheartedly press on to completion.

On a housing estate the two main partners will usually be the tenants and residents and the landlord. This may be the council or a housing association, housing trust or similar body.

The landlord:

Have considerable resources at their disposal, such as:

- Paid workers.
- Knowledge of housing.
- Equipment.
- Ability to travel.
- Influence over other service providers.
- Maintenance and repairs service.
- Legal department.
- Publicity department.
- Direct access to the decision-makers, on the council or board of management.

They also:

- Set the policy to be followed in housing.
- Enforce the tenancy agreements.
- Maintain the surrounding area.
- Have financial interest in the upkeep of the area, as they own the houses.

The tenants and residents:

Also have resources to bring into the partnership, like:

- Local knowledge, they live there.
- Commitment to see things improve.
- Having the trust of the community.
- Being the voice of the community.
- Being on the receiving end of the services provided.

- Having access to independent advice and funding not open to the landlord.
- Being able to communicate with their membership.
- Maybe, being part of a larger tenant and resident movement locally (federation) or belonging to a national organisation.
- Providing local services like surgeries for police, housing, local ward councillors or a tool bank to loan gardening equipment etc.

The common objective:

Both the landlord and the tenants and residents want to see the area and housing improve. The landlord has a maturing and increasing asset in the houses, the tenants and residents want a pleasant place to live in where they feel safe and happy.

Agreeing how the common objective will be reached:

This should be by negotiation and agreement, which is written down and signed and observed by both partners. This may come in different forms depending on the circumstances and who the landlord is.

Council housing

All council housing estates are now expected to have a neighbourhood tenants' compact. This is an agreement on service delivery for that estate which fits within the local authority wide compact, the principals of which apply to all council housing in the area.

Housing associations/housing trusts etc.

This may be in the form of an estate agreement, which usually lasts for one year and is regularly monitored by both the tenants and the landlord.

Mixed landlord estates

These may opt for either of the above examples depending on the predominance of the landlords. If most of the housing belongs to the council it may be appropriate for the other tenants to be included in the neighbourhood compact. If most of the housing is owned by other landlords an estate agreement might be better.

What can the partners do for each other?

The landlord can unlock the resources of the local authority or housing association for the benefit of the tenants and residents by:

Providing information which is:

- Relevant.
- Up to date.
- Accurate and complete, giving both sides of the issue.
- Easy to read and understand - in plain English - large fonts - illustrated - short and to the point - colourful - well laid out - translations in other common languages - on audio tape - in Braille.
- Easily accessible - posted through every door, in newsletters and personal letters - on notice boards, posters - on a web page, with a talk back facility - personally

via surveys, open days, drop-ins, public meetings etc.

Seeking information by:

- Surveys.
- Reply slips with free post facility.
- Freephone number with answerphone.
- Public meetings, publishing the results for everyone to see.
- Focus groups.
- Repair satisfaction cards.
- Consultation over a period, giving time for tenants and residents to reflect on and discuss the issues in the light of the information given and that which is independently obtained.

Providing resources for tenants' and residents' groups, like:

- Photocopying and printing their newsletter.
- Training to enable members to service their own organisation.
- Finance in the form of grants or a tenants' levy.
- Hire of meeting rooms for public meetings.
- Allocating premises for tenants and residents to use as offices and stores.
- Giving officer time to support tenants and residents groups in the formative stages.

The tenants and residents can bring the local customer view to all activities undertaken by the landlord. They can also initiate their own actions and projects calling on the support of the landlord. They can:

- Send representatives to area housing meetings.
- Serve on Best Value review boards.
- Run local surgeries for service providers.
- Campaign for improvements and changes to services.
- Take up individual cases that fall through the official net.
- Direct people to the right course of action to solve individual problems.
- Establish themed groups of tenants, who are not necessarily members of the committee, to pursue particular projects, like: local parks provision, bus services, crime and behaviour, street cleaning etc. This involves more people who are only committed to one theme and do not want to get involved in other things.

Sharing information and developing skills

By working together the tenants and residents and the landlord have a lot to give each other for their mutual benefit. One area is gaining information, taking part in a wider debate and training to acquire skills and understanding.

There are many seminars, conferences and events around housing which housing workers routinely attend. Tenant and resident representatives would gain much by accompanying them and taking an active part. Similarly tenant and resident organisations also produce events of this kind and the housing workers would benefit from attending these.

Joint training sessions can be arranged which will encourage co-operation and

understanding between the tenants and residents and the housing workers. It is often thought that only the landlords can provide, organise and host events of this kind. Tenants' and residents' groups are increasingly organising their own.

Networking

It has often been said that houses do not make communities - it is people that make the difference. Most people consider that the immediate area within which they live is their "community", made up of familiar streets and faces, relationships and activities.

For small communities to work they need people to be involved in talking together and reaching a common view of how they would like things to be. The area, public transport, schools and services - most people would like to see improvements and changes in these that they mostly agree on. That view needs to be made known to the tenants' and residents' association for the wider area and represented by them in their work with other organisations.

The tenants' and residents' association's focus is around the housing and its setting, which leads them to work closely with the landlord and other key service providers like the police and social services. They may have representation on various official committees and boards which govern the service providers' activities. This is valuable overall but their voice is small and is only part of a much wider area. It can easily be lost and not influence the service for "their" people.

Tenants' and residents' associations increasingly need to consider "calling" the services to themselves - in effect making their area the focus of attention of the various service providers. This really local community then becomes the cement in the wall of service provision, the common thread and focus of the various service providers.

To help the tenants' and residents' association do this there is a web of voluntary and statutory organisations both locally, regionally and nationally.

By working in this way the local community will encourage people to be involved (as is their right), to really influence the changes needed in their street; more and more people will be included and the small community made stronger. The services and resources available will be used more effectively and the community will become sustainable in the long term.

Finally

By working together on an equal basis in an open, honest and straightforward way, estates can become places where people want to live to follow their chosen life style. The common aim is for a balanced, stable, well ordered, clean and happy community. This Information Sheet has pointed the way to establish workable partnerships to help bring this about.

Further Reading

TPAS has a number of publications covering in more detail much of the information given above. For example subjects covered include:

- Constitutions for tenants' and residents' associations
- Producing newsletters
- Estate Agreements
- Estate and area/district committees
- Focus groups
- Setting up a tenants' association
- Running a tenants' association
- Running effective meetings
- Producing newsletters
- Tenant Participation Compacts etc.

For a publications list, contact TPAS at the address overleaf.

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5th Floor
Trafford House
Chester Road
Manchester M32 0RS
Tel: 0161 868 3500
Fax: 0161 877 6256
e-mail: info@tpas.org.uk

For further information about TPAS,
visit our website at: www.tpas.org.uk