

Training session 04

How to run an effective residents' association

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These notes are part of a series of 8 training sessions

- 01 Explore your rights to engage and be heard
- 02 Equality, diversity and inclusion
- 03 Resident panels
- 04 Running effective residents' associations
- 05 Social housing legal requirements
- 06 Social housing regulatory requirements
- 07 Understanding landlord financial models
- 08 Options for resident control



Contents

Introduction – What is a residents’ association?	3
Getting started.....	5
The nuts and bolts of running an effective residents’ association	7
Setting up/running an effective residents’ association	11

Introduction – What is a residents’ association?

A residents’ association (RA) is a group of people who live in a neighbourhood and decide that they want to get together to deal with issues that affect their local community. The group can include tenants, shared owners, leaseholders and homeowners. Forming an RA means coming together in a formal way, the group will have a set of simple rules, usually known as a constitution. A constitution is a list of rules for your RA. It sets out the aims of your group and how your group will work towards those aims. The constitution will cover at least the following key issues:

1. Membership shall be open to all residents in the community.
2. All members will have an equal vote.
3. All members should actively seek to represent the various needs of the area and must not discriminate on the grounds of nationality, political opinion, race, religious opinion, gender, age, sexuality or disability.
4. Members shall at all times conduct themselves in a reasonable manner when attending meetings or any functions linked to the RA.

Your landlord will have examples of ‘model’ constitutions for RAs

The members of the association represent everyone living within the building, area or estate to the landlord and may request information about services from them. They also support one another in the event of any conflict between residents and the landlord.

Groups of residents might start an RA for a variety of reasons, such as:

- campaigning for something positive e.g. a better play area
- campaigning against something or get services improved
- giving your community a greater voice than you would have as an individual
- creating a better sense of community in your area
- organising social activities or get involved in local events
- keeping residents informed of what’s happening in your neighbourhood
- taking positive action to tackle problems and improve the area you live in

United, the residents have more power collectively than they would have as individuals. Residents’ associations therefore make it easier for members to have a say in issues that pertain to the rights conferred to them under the terms of their tenancies or leases.

The association acts as a representative body on behalf of residents in areas of common interest, such as maintenance, repairs, grounds maintenance and other services that are the landlord's responsibility to provide. A residents' association also represents residents if they are opposing development or planning applications.

Getting started

It's worth asking yourself and your neighbours some straight questions

What are we trying to achieve?

What do we have to do to get there?

Will people support setting up an RA?

Maybe the only way to get answers is to give it a go?

Here are some pointers to get you started:

- Talk to residents in your area, find out if there is enough interest to make forming a Residents' Association possible.
- You need to talk to as many people as you can in as many ways as possible e.g. door knocking, going into local facilities like community and health centres, faith centres, post office, schools and youth groups.
- Find out the common concerns of people living in your neighbourhood.
- Contact your landlord, who will be able to offer advice and support you in trying to get a group started. They may be able to offer resources and put you in touch with existing groups in the area.
- Organise a public event or meeting to discuss setting up a Residents' Association. Your landlord should be able to help with a venue and publicity and will work with you to get a group up and running.

The nuts and bolts of running an effective residents' association

Here are some things to think about when setting up an RA:

There are no set down rules on how an RA should be run, but you will have to make some decisions about how to organise the group to ensure it works effectively and fairly. You could start with questions like:

The Committee

- Do we need one?
- How many should be on our committee?
- What will their roles be?

Meetings

- How often should we meet and where?
- How should we run our meetings?
- What topics should we discuss?

How to get and keep people involved

- How can we get people involved?
- How can we keep people involved?

Constitution

- Do we need one? (yes, if you want your group to be formally recognised by your landlord).
- What should the rules be?
- What should our aims and objectives be?

Moving forward

If you decide to have a committee, it is elected by the members of the RA at an open (or general) meeting.

The committee are responsible for running the association, organising general meetings for all members, committee meetings and an annual general meeting AGM to elect officers.

The committee will probably make decisions on behalf of the association, these decisions must be reported back to all members. The committee and the RA should represent all people living in the neighbourhood.

The committee should consist of at least 4 officers - a Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary and Treasurer (roles described further below).

Meetings

RA meetings should be held on a regular basis, whether it is monthly, bi-monthly or quarterly. Especially since the pandemic, some meetings could be held online, if all members have access to the internet. Some RAs hold separate meetings just for the committee, as well as general meetings for all members. Others prefer to hold all their meetings as open meetings for anyone to attend. It's up to you and your group.

It is important to publicise the meetings in the neighbourhood so that everyone has the opportunity to attend and have their say. Meetings are a way of giving and getting information, discussing and sharing ideas and making decisions. The success of a meeting depend on four core issues:

- 1 People being clear about the reasons for the meeting – you need a list of topics to be discussed at the meeting – this is the agenda
- 2 The venue and time of the meeting being suitable for all
- 3 The meeting is well run and effectively managed by the chair
- 4 People are clear if the meeting is about only information and discussion or/and if decisions on the way forward will be made

Meetings should be interesting and enjoyable and, most importantly, people should feel comfortable.

Feeding back to the community

It is important for any RA to feedback discussions and decisions to the wider community in the neighbourhood. This can be done at general meetings or by producing a newsletter. Again, your landlord should be able to help with this. It's important to feedback in a variety of ways and think about the needs of people in the area, for example, some people may have difficulty reading printed material, some people may not have English as their first language, some people may not have access to the internet. Have a think about the best ways that will work in your area, it may be a combination of a number of ways.

Finance

You may not need finance to run your group. But you may need it to print and distribute minutes, newsletters and updates for the community. Finance to run your group may be available from your landlord, so get in touch with them.

You may also want to run some community social events. Finance can be very important to groups and can also cause the most concern.

If detailed clauses are included in the constitution this will help the group run smoothly and help the treasurer in their role. Here are some finance ground rules:

- 1 All money raised by or on behalf of the RA is to be used only to further the aims of the RA.
- 2 The treasurer shall open a bank account in the name of the RA.
- 3 Cheque signatories will be nominated by the committee (one must be the treasurer). There should be 3 signatories. These should not be from the same household or the same family.
- 4 All cheques and instructions to the RA's bankers shall require 2 of the agreed signatures.
- 5 The treasurer shall have the accounts checked by an independent person with adequate financial experience, for example, a representative of the community organisation, law centre or council for voluntary service, at the end of each financial year.
- 6 The accounts shall be available to all members at the AGM.

Your landlord will require that a recognised group should be able to demonstrate responsible accounting methods.

The role of Chair

- prepare the agenda
- ensure meetings run to time & keep people on topic
- encourage productive discussions at meetings
- ensure terms of code of conduct in operation at all times

- manage/communicate decision-making
- encourage effective working relationships with/between other RA Officers
- represent the RA internally/externally

The role of Committee Secretary

- work with the Chair to prepare the agenda; distributing agendas, leaflets, notices
- writing and distributing meeting minutes
- manage the receipt of and sending out of e-mails; letters etc
- maintaining and updating committee records

The role of Treasurer

- keeping financial records
- managing the RA bank account
- managing petty cash and RA expenditure
- reporting financial info to the RA committee on a quarterly/regular basis
- producing & presenting financial information to AGM

Effective Chairing

- start/finish meetings on time
- welcome everyone and introduce new people/guests
- state purpose of meeting & a reminder about code of conduct
- introduce items
- ensure understanding and encourage participation and input into discussions
- encourage people to 'speak through the chair'
- manage speakers
- sum-up decisions after each item, if relevant.

Dealing with difficult situations at meetings

- be polite but firm
- challenge the behaviour, never the person
- remind them of the aim of the discussion; the agenda item; code of conduct
- ask them to summarise the point they are making
- ask them to suggest a solution, if applicable
- adjourn the meeting if necessary
- refer the matter to the landlord (e.g. resident involvement team) for assistance/support/or for action

Setting up/running an effective residents' association

Top tips

Ask two questions:

'What are you trying to achieve?'

'Will people support setting up a Residents Association?'

Talk to your neighbours and residents in your area – do people think it's a good idea?

Think about local issues and concerns – what things can you succeed in changing

Ask your landlord for help – they will help with setting up a Residents Association and often have a dedicated team of people who can provide advice, help and even funding

Think about some publicity – how to get information from your fellow residents and how to feed back information about what the group is doing

Getting help

More information at <https://fourmillionhomes.org>

Talk to others – there may be a federation of residents' associations in your area

Talk to your landlord – it's part of their responsibility to help you