

A Guide to setting up an accredited Resident Association

This guide has been designed to give ideas and helpful guidance to Westminster City Council's tenants and leaseholders on setting up a Resident Association in their area.

Being part of a Resident Association gives people the opportunity to discuss important local issues and have a say in Council decisions that affect services in their area. When residents work together, they can make change for in their community. Resident Associations can also organise events and activities that help build a stronger sense of community.

The resident engagement team can help to support you while your group is getting started and will be there for you as your group gets established, to help you build links within the Housing department and across the council.

What is a Resident Association?

A Resident Association (RA) is a voluntary group of people who live in a neighbourhood and decide to represent and support their local community. Resident Associations are independent of the council, but the council has a role to play in supporting groups and ensuring accredited RAs are following a transparent governance process.

Residents can come together and form a Resident Association to address a particular priority in their neighbourhood or to build a stronger sense of community in the area. Resident Associations also play a vital role when consultation with local communities is needed.

Why start a Resident Association?

- To campaign for a positive change or to protect something you love about where you live (e.g. a better repairs service, playground, green space etc.)
- To bring together different resident views to give your community a shared voice and work closely with the housing service to improve the way things work in your neighbourhood
- To arrange local events, raise money, and build a stronger sense of community (e.g. a street party or keep fit etc)
- To keep residents informed about what is happening in your neighbourhood.

Where do I start?

Step 1: Check for an existing RA

- Check that there is not already an RA covering any part of the neighbourhood you want your new group to cover.
- You can find out about existing resident groups in Westminster by contacting the Resident Engagement Team (residentengagement@westminster.gov.uk).

Step 2: Talk to your neighbours

- Knock on people's doors, chat over the fence, in communal areas, shops, schools and community centres.

You'll need to find out:

- Do they think an RA could make a difference in your area?
 - Whether the issues affecting others are the same ones that you are concerned about?
 - What homes and area do they want the RA cover?
 - Would they be willing to join the group and help run it?
- Try and build a group of people who reflect the diversity of your community, that way you have the best chance of building a group where everyone can feel comfortable and want to get involved.
 - You need to find at least 6 people who are willing to help run the RA and attend regular meetings. That will involve giving up several hours of their time every month for at least a year while helping to run the RA. This might sound like a lot, but this work at the beginning will really pay off over time, ensuring that you have people who are willing and able to work together.

Step 3: Contact the Resident Engagement Team

- Get in contact with us to find out more about getting accredited as an RA.
 - We can offer free training to help you learn skills to help run a successful RA. This includes things like chairing a meeting, fundraising, treasury skill and minute taking.
 - We can help with leaflets, letters, emails, templates, data about your community, translations or interpreters if required, and a meeting place for your first meeting.

We will also give you an idea of any criteria you would need to meet before we award an accreditation to your group. This could include proving you have tried to reach all sections of the community in your area including tenants, leaseholders, people who don't speak or read English, and young people among others.

Step 4: Arrange an initial meeting.

- Invite your Housing Officer.
- The Resident Engagement Team can offer advice on where to hold your meetings and can help cover meeting room fees if no free community space is available.
- Consider cultural differences when planning your meeting and make provision for people with disabilities and children.

Step 5: Make sure that everyone knows about the meeting.

- The Resident Engagement Team can provide a template to create a simple letter, leaflet or poster to let people know about the date, time, and place of the meeting.
- Include who to contact if they are interested in finding out more or getting involved. Post the leaflets through letterboxes, put them onto noticeboards or share them on social media.
- Make sure you give people plenty of notice and reminders to maximise participation.

Step 6: Hold the first meeting

- Your Housing Officer and Resident Engagement Officer can attend your first meeting and can help you to draw up an agenda.

- The first meeting is a chance for the Housing Service to answer questions about what setting up and running an RA involves.
- During this initial planning meeting someone will need to act as 'Chair'.

After your first meeting you will know if you have enough interest locally to go ahead and set up a sustainable RA. You will need at least 6 people who want to help run the group and have time to attend regular meetings. Your next step is to organise a public meeting to launch your new RA, this is called a launch Annual General Meeting (AGM).

Step 7: Preparing for your launch AGM

- Choose a name for your group
- Read through the template constitution which will be signed by the new committee when elected. Speak to your resident engagement officer should you have any questions.
- Start creating a membership list. You will need to create a membership form that lets your new members know the list will be shared with the Resident Engagement Team. We can provide a template data protection policy to help you manage the data members will share with you when joining your group.
- Confirm the area your group will represent in conversation with the Resident Engagement Team.
- Decide on a date and time for your launch AGM and book a venue.
- 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.
- Arrange the distribution of the leaflet and/or posters.
- If you have decided to invite representatives from other Organisations contact them and check they can attend. A member of the Resident Engagement Team will attend and can oversee your elections if you don't have another independent facilitator.
- Make sure you have decided on who is going to chair the meeting, take notes and record the names, contact details and addresses of everyone who attends the meeting.
- Agree an agenda and check it with the person chairing the meeting.

Step 8: At the launch AGM

- Maximise this opportunity to register new members for the RA.
- Vote to adopt a constitution.
- Elect committee members including, as a minimum, a Chair, Secretary and Treasurer.
- Decide on date for the first meeting of the committee, the frequency of committee meetings, which committee meetings will be open to members, and the rough date of the next annual general meeting.
- Get to know each other and build relationships with each other and with Council representatives.
- Collect ideas for future discussions by using tools like an ideas board or suggestion box

Step 9: Bank account and grant

- Open a bank account in the name of the group with at least two signatories from the elected committee. Most RAs that don't have an office address use the home address of the treasurer for their bank account.
- Contact the Resident Engagement Team to request your start up grant

Committee members and their roles

The committee runs the RA on a day-to-day basis on behalf of the members. The committee will organise general meetings and the Annual General Meetings (AGM) and will carry out any decisions made at these meetings. The membership of the committee should reflect the diversity of the people it represents, and the balance of tenants and leaseholders should be the same as for the area the group covers.

To set up an RA you must have at least six people with enough spare time and dedication to fulfil the key roles within the committee. There will be three officer roles; the Chair, Secretary and Treasurer and at least 3 general committee members who actively support the officers in their roles.

Chair - A Chair is elected to provide leadership, plan, call and chair meetings, and ensure that the committee works well together. A Chair should ensure that the RA keeps to its aims. A Chair often represents the group at other meetings and forums.

Secretary - A Secretary is responsible for administration and communication. They set the agenda with the Chair, record meetings, distribute summary notes from previous meetings and agendas for meetings coming up, and occasionally write letters on behalf of the RA.

Treasurer - A Treasurer oversees the management of any money collected or grants received. They pay bills and keep accurate records of money received and spent. The Treasurer works with the committee to carry out financial planning for the year. They ensure that all expenditure is agreed at a recorded meeting. They should share bank statements with the committee at every meeting. At the end of the year they prepare the final accounts, arrange for them to be independently reviewed, and present them along with a financial report to all members at the following AGM.

Resident Association Grant

For your RA to be grant funded by Housing Service, the Chair, Secretary, Treasurer and a majority of the committee must be tenants or leaseholders of Westminster City Council. The Resident Engagement Team will provide a start-up grant of £250 to help you get established when you have set up a bank account for your group.

You will receive an annual grant after your Resident Engagement Officer has completed your first annual review meeting and you have received your accreditation. The amount of grant you receive will depend on the number of homes your group covers and the accreditation you receive.

Training and Support

The Resident Engagement Team will run a programme of regular free training sessions which the members of an accredited RA are welcome to attend. This will include training relevant to each of the officer roles as well as other skills to help run an excellent RA. We will also try to support other training needs that your committee may have. The resident engagement team can give practical advice to members of new and existing RA that need our help. For independent advice you can also contact TPAS (www.tpas.org.uk) 0161 868 3500 info@tpas.org.uk

Frequently asked questions

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

A group must cover at least 20 homes managed by the Westminster City Council housing service and can be as large as you want it to be. For example, it could cover a small sheltered housing scheme, one street, or a whole estate. It is up to the residents to decide the area they want the group to cover as long as no part of the area is covered by an existing resident group.

What is 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. It provides a framework to ensure fair and transparent processes are followed. This will help your group avoid or respond to challenges that may arise from time to time. A template constitution can be supplied by the Resident Engagement Team.

What is a quorum?

This is the number of members required for a meeting to go ahead. You can decide what the quorum will be for your group.

Who can be members of the RA?

Membership of the association shall be open to all Westminster City Council tenants, owner-occupiers, leaseholders or private tenants and their family members in the defined area.

The committee may accept any person as an associate member. They shall have all the privileges of membership except the right to vote at meetings and to be elected as members of 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?

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 are made aware that they attend meetings as a tenant and not on behalf of the landlord.

Can a councillor who is also a tenant be a member 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.

Will we need a bank account?

Yes, to be an accredited RA and receive grant you must have a bank account in the name of the RA with at least two signatories.

Will we need insurance?

Your group is not required to have insurance. However, we recommend that you get public liability insurance if you plan to organise any formal outings or events.

Does an RA have to keep accounts?

Yes, WCC Housing Service requires that accredited Resident Associations should be able to demonstrate responsible financial management. That means keeping accounts, having them independently reviewed annually, presenting the reviewed accounts to all members at your AGM, and sharing them with the Resident Engagement Team during your annual review.

What is an AGM (Annual General Meeting)?

This is an important meeting as it is the meeting where the committee reports on the activities of the RA over the previous year. At this meeting all members of the committee stand down and a new committee is elected, although people who have been on the committee can put themselves forward for re-election. Your constitution should state when and how this meeting will be held and how members and other local residents will be informed of it in advance.

What is the role of a Resident Engagement Officer?

Resident Engagement Officers help to set up the RA, independently oversee committee elections, answer questions about RA governance, arrange training, support some local events or membership drives, carry out annual reviews, award an accreditation level, and arrange grant payments. The Resident Engagement Officer will not usually attend committee meetings unless there is a specific reason for them to attend.

Housing Officers are responsible for the day-to-day housing services on their patch. They attend most RA meetings if invited. They can provide updates and answers questions about housing services in the area.

What information will an accredited RA need to share with the WCC Resident Engagement Team?

When you are an established RA your resident engagement officer will review your accreditation once a year. During each annual review, your group will need to provide the following:

- Committee details form with contact details showing tenants and leaseholders.
- Example notice & minutes from your regular meetings.
- Evidence of your bank account including balance and signatories.
- A copy of your independently reviewed accounts for the last financial year.
- Evidence of the notice, promotion & minutes from your last AGM.
- Examples of recent communication with members and other local residents.
- Evidence of any events or activities such as photos and promotion material.
- Your most up-to-date membership list including names and addresses.

The resident engagement team can provide a template data protection policy for your group so that members are aware that you will be sharing this information with us.

How can I get more help and information regarding setting up an RA?

You can contact the resident engagement team on Resident Engagement Team on residentengagement@westminster.gov.uk. Or you can call 0800 358 3783 to request a call back from a member of the team.