

Agenda Item 049:10

TARAs and Tenant Clubs



Introduction

Rotherham Federation of Tenants and Residents (RotherFed) supports a wide variety of tenants and residents associations, community associations and community partnerships. To us, groups should be community led and controlled, and officers from partnering agencies available for support and help as and when needed. There are some very basic conditions of membership of the federation, the primary one being that groups adopt a constitution that state everyone in the area of benefit is included as a member.

Our members are independent and are responsible for ensuring the requirements of their constitution are met. Where they are constituted as charities or incorporated as companies, groups will be accountable to either the Charity Commission or Companies House. Many of our members though, remain unincorporated associations and therefore have no legal status within the law. Nevertheless, we do believe groups retain some moral responsibility to their communities they serve and that the rules set out in their constitutions are being kept.

RotherFed primarily acts as a support organisation, encouraging good practice amongst our members for instance through the quality awards. In cases where a group's constitution may no longer be fit for purpose, we would often recommend that the group alters their constitution to meet the changing needs of their members.

For a variety of reasons, some community groups can go through periods of inactivity. RotherFed is there to provide support to those groups on ways forward. This includes help with closing the group properly, an area where often small community groups get little support. More difficult is finding



ways to provide help in periods when members do not want the group to close but there are not the volunteers available to take on the key responsibilities to keep it going (eg: chair, secretary and treasurer).



In many of our sheltered complexes, officers (often wardens) work with individuals to support social activities with tenants. For many, this provides the social opportunities that many desire without the responsibilities running a TARA entails. Governance and financial responsibilities are no

longer the sole responsibility of the group and with some of these informal clubs an effective constitution and bank account may not be required. You are being asked to consider whether we should recognise this interim form of community organisation as Associate Members – possibly a tenant club.

Argument

I have spoken with a variety of people both in Rotherham and in other areas about whether tenant clubs (informal groups of tenants supported by an officer) should be supported. St.Leger Homes supports this form of organisation and tenant clubs are included as non-voting members of Doncaster Federation of Tenants and Residents. Warrington Housing Association supports unconstituted and unofficial groups in a number of ways, providing support with a certain amount of officer's time, producing documentation for instance photocopying and if the group is made up solely of their tenants (e.g. sheltered groups) provide support with an annual donation to go towards a social event (last year it was £3.50 per household). They found that supporting the unofficial groups provided an opportunity to consult with them and helps with good relations with tenants. They also found that a softly softly approach with groups has led them to becoming confident enough to becoming more official and taking on the mantle of governance and finance.

Nottingham Homes too provides support for groups representing communities of interest under represented in geographical TARAs, for instance a group representing the Gypsy and Roma communities. Many other housing organisations take a similar approach and see this as a way of empowering and engaging with their residents and customers, particularly from minority groups.

There are key debates amongst community development professionals on what is considered appropriate intervention of officers in empowerment of community groups. Without support, groups are never given space to flourish but sometimes with too much support, they often collapse when the paid officer moves away. RotherFed sits very clearly within the community sector and recognises the clear difference between community groups controlled by their members and focus groups created by and supported by officers of statutory agencies. Our TARA members are all independent and directly accountable to the communities they serve. A new form of membership (albeit associate) though a means of engaging more people, could confuse our members on what TARAs are about and may inadvertently promote the wrong message to our well governed groups.



Good governance and financial responsibility are at the heart of what we and our members do. Accountability to the community our TARAs represent is paramount. Running a group out of a cash box may happen in many centres (some informal bingo clubs can manage considerable sums) but unfortunately cannot be promoted or supported because it is a not a transparent way of managing monies. Our community accountant at Voluntary Action Rotherham has advised that we cannot and should not endorse this lack of financial transparency. Likewise, many groups excel at social events but it is the meetings they hold (however occasional) that make them accountable to the communities they serve.

Summary



There are many good informal social and bingo clubs particularly in sheltered accommodation often managed and supported by officers. This form of organisation though very welcome are not TARAs and in my view should not be confused with independent community organisations. A primary aims of RotherFed is to support TARAs. The meetings we hold and the work we do is open to all tenants and residents and we welcome everyone's input and contribution. I believe tenant clubs lack the governance and financial accountability to be members of our organisation(albeit non-voting).

Instead, RotherFed needs to focus our attention on both:

- Supporting groups that are struggling to meet their governance responsibilities and require help from us
- Promoting and supporting individuals who wished to set up and start up groups.

This work should become the key priority for the company over the next six months.

Recommendations

I recommend to the Board that

- The Member Development Officer and Development Manager initiate a programme of work both to support new groups and those that are struggling to meet their governance obligations
- Board members and volunteers to provide support in delivery of the above recommendation
- To add a regular agenda item to Board Meeting reporting progress

Steve Ruffle (Development Manager)

Monday 10th May 2010