

A better place to live

How to organise and hold effective residents' meetings



green
alliance...



Making it happen

Inspired to start? This is what you need to begin making changes in and around your block:

- _ The involvement of as many residents in the block as possible. The landlord is much more likely to listen if a lot of people are calling for change.
- _ A clear plan of what you want to do and why.
- _ Co-operation from the staff who run the block and the landlord. Before you start, it will be important to talk with the building managers and find out what they think and if there are already any plans for change and development.

Getting people involved

To start the ball rolling, you need to work out what the issues are in your estate or block, and what people care about most. You could work with your existing residents' group or organise a meeting about it for residents that are interested.

It can be difficult to know where to start, but there's plenty of advice available on how to go about it.

The toolkit provides lists of questions that could be used to kickstart your discussion.

Here we give some ideas on how to bring people together and how to use your meetings effectively to come up with a plan of action.

Getting people along to an initial meeting

Here are some simple suggestions for how best to get people along:

- _ Put posters up in visible locations, for example in lifts, the entrance lobby and on every floor.
- _ Explore whether there are any email lists for the block that you can use to promote the workshop.
- _ If you have a community newsletter, put an advert for the meeting in that.
- _ Put a simple flyer (eg a smaller version of the poster) through everyone's letterbox.
- _ Ask people you know to invite and bring along one other person.
- _ Consider offering simple food and drink at the event (and perhaps asking other residents to contribute items).
- _ If there are multiple blocks in one estate, try to do one meeting for all blocks to help get more people along.

Designing the meeting to be accessible to all

- _ Choose a time that is convenient for most people. If most residents work, arrange the meeting outside conventional working hours. If many people have children consider a time before 'bedtime' and think about how the children might be entertained during the workshop.
- _ If there is a residents' meeting room, then book that. Whoever manages that room may be keen to help. If not, is there a room at a nearby community centre or pub where you could meet? Choose a place that is easy to access, where everyone will be able to hear each other and won't be disturbed by others. You might want somewhere that has access to a small kitchen, or at least a tap for refreshments.
- _ Keep the meeting fairly short, two hours maximum.
- _ Consider how languages other than English might be catered for.
- _ Ask one or two friends to help you prepare for and run the meeting, and help clean up at the end. Discuss with them how the meeting will run.
- _ Plan for the meeting to be interactive and informal to keep people interested.

Before the first meeting

Here are some things to think about before the meeting:

Who's going to do the various jobs?

You'll need a few people to help you run the meeting, ideally someone to do each of these tasks:

- _ 'Facilitate' the discussion – to ask some questions, get things going, encourage people to talk, etc.
- _ Welcome people when they arrive, take their addresses and emails.
- _ Offer people tea/coffee and biscuits.
- _ Take notes, write them up and distribute them afterwards.
- _ Make sure the meeting keeps to time.

What materials might you need?

This will depend on what activities you have planned. Large sheets of paper (flip chart pad or the back of old posters) are useful to allow everyone to see what is written. You will probably need to provide small sheets of paper and pens, as well as crockery for refreshments.

What could happen at the meeting?

You need to work out what you will discuss at the meeting.

Following is a suggested draft agenda of activities for this initial meeting.

Suggested first meeting agenda

Time needed	Activity	Details
5 mins	Introduction to the meeting	<p>Explain:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> _who you are _why you are holding this meeting _what you hope to achieve _where the toilets are _when you will finish
10 mins	Introductions	<p>Ask everyone to introduce themselves to the group and circulate a sheet of paper for everyone to write their name and contact details on. You might want to include a short ice-breaker activity to help get people relaxed.</p>
45 mins	Do a walkabout of your block and its surroundings	<p>If the weather is OK, you could do a walkabout of your surroundings as a group. This is a simple way of getting people to think about ideas for improving your area. It can be led by anyone, without much preparation. Ask the group three simple questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.What do we like about this place? 2.What do we dislike about it? 3.What do we need to work on? <p>You can give people clipboards or notebooks and even give them maps of the area (print these off from Google maps, with your block in the centre and the map covering about 200 yards around it).</p> <p>There is a detailed guide on how best to carry out a walkabout at www.placecheck.info</p> <p>If easier, you can simply have a discussion using the same questions. Write up people's ideas and comments on large sheets of paper so that everyone can see them, or get someone to take notes.</p>
10 mins	Toilet and refreshment break	<p>This is an essential part of any meeting. People cannot concentrate if they need a break.</p>
30 mins	Discuss in more detail, and record, the ideas and opinions that arose in the first session. You might want to start prioritising the things people think are the most important	<p>There are a number of issues that may come up, which are nothing to do with improving the natural environment. For example concerns over security, crime or anti-social behaviour. If this is what people want to talk about you may wish to concentrate on them first before moving onto environmental issues. However it is worth considering that the act of getting people involved in their neighbourhood may itself tackle some of these issues.</p> <p>This website provides advice for communities on how to improve their local area more generally and could be the first step to dealing with these issues. It contains sections on 'reducing community crime' and 'working with the police': www.communitygroup.co.uk/CommunitySafetyCategory.html and www.communitygroup.co.uk/how-neighbourhood-watch-improved-community-case-study.html</p>
10 mins	Discuss next steps	<p>Discuss who needs to be involved in the next meeting, when it will take place and the next steps to take to make it effective. It may be helpful to split actions into:</p> <p>NOW What can be done immediately? For example, contacting the council to remove fly tipping.</p> <p>SOON What would we like to achieve in the next month or two? Agree who will be responsible for finding out more information about each. Make a note of this, and be sure that they know when and how they are expected to report back.</p> <p>LATER What would we like to achieve in the longer term, and what are the ways ahead? Make a note of the steps you have decided to take to make progress on these actions.</p> <p>Some of what you need to tackle may involve the council or managers of the block. Make sure anyone who is going to take action knows who to contact and how.</p> <p>Agree to meet again, and set the date now. This will be a chance to report back on what people have done, and explore some of the environmental issues in more detail. You may want to invite someone from the council or managing agency to your next meeting (contact them well in advance).</p> <p>You might want to think about what information you could find out before the next meeting. For example, are there any plans for regeneration or development in the area? Have any useful appraisals and plans already been prepared?</p>

Making the discussions work well

As the facilitator of the discussion you need to respect each suggestion and intervention and appreciate all contributions.

_Keep the discussion positive: look for creative ideas, and don't let people just focus on problems. Write these down and ask people to think about what we can do about them.

_Make sure everyone has the chance to speak: if one or two people are speaking too much tell them that you've got their points (make sure that these are noted) and encourage others to chip in. Breaking people up into small groups would give more people a chance to speak, but make sure each group has a note-taker.

There are many ways to make the discussions work well, such as:

_Everybody gives one answer: ask people to contribute the one thing that comes to mind in response to each question. It doesn't matter if people duplicate the answer of another resident. Record answers on big pieces of paper under each question.

_Round robin: go round the group giving everyone time to express their opinion.

_Pairs: ask residents to pair up to discuss the answer to a particular question.

The second meeting

At the second meeting you can focus on environmental issues in more depth.

Again you need to think about the roles that will be taken at that meeting and what needs to be done to prepare for it.

Following is a draft agenda of activities that you could use to consider different areas of action, eg energy, water, waste, transport and green spaces.

Suggested second meeting agenda

Time needed	Activity	Details
5 mins	Introduction to the workshop	See above
10 mins	Introductions	See above. Consider that you will probably have different people along for this meeting.
15 mins	Feedback on the first meeting	What progress has been made? What have people found out? You may need to quickly summarise the first meeting for those who weren't there.
20 mins	Group discussion: what actions have people already taken	Ask people to volunteer the actions they have already taken on the environment and what actions they would like to take. Go through each of energy, water, waste, transport and green spaces in turn. You may like to do this in small groups to enable a better discussion. Record the answers on a flip chart.
10 mins	Toilet and refreshment break	
30 mins	Activity to explore further what actions people would like to take	<p>You could try the following activity to explore in more detail what actions people have already taken on the environment and what actions they would like to take.</p> <p>You need to have actions written on individual cards in advance (see our 'what you can do' suggestions in the toolkit for ideas). Place these in a pile on the edge of a large sheet of paper with concentric circles drawn on it. In groups of 4 or 5 go through each deck of cards and decide as a group:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> _ which actions you have taken and place them on one pile; _ which actions you wouldn't like to take and place them on a second pile; _ which actions you would like to and realistically could take and place them on a third pile; _ which actions you would like to take but think would be more challenging / need support and place them on a fourth pile. <p>Take the last two piles and ask each resident to prioritise one of these actions by moving it one ring closer to the centre of the sheet of paper. By the end of the exercise the actions closest to the centre will be those that participants are interested in prioritising as a group.</p>
10 mins	Discuss next steps	As above.