



Organising for Impact



A Guide for Activists

July 2024

Organising for Impact: A Guide for Activists

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Organising for Impact: A Guide for Activists

Organising for Impact

This leaflet sets out actions that groups can organise together to challenge aspects of their landlords' poor performance and force change. We hope that it will help generate ideas that can be adopted by SHAC groups and others.

For some time, SHAC has represented a hub through which tenants and residents can meet each other. The support of peers with a shared experience has offered welcome relief from the feelings of isolation that many experience as they are mistreated and gaslighted by their landlord.

But we want groups to go further. From peer support to strategic challenge, otherwise we only replicate what many other groups offer: a space to vent. Organising helps ease the overwhelming feelings of powerlessness members suffer when faced by a large and formidable organisation.

Our experience over the years demonstrates that an action by a group – even a small group - can have a major impact. An army does not have to be large provided it has energy and everyone is willing to take responsibility for their share of tasks.

Links and pointers to resources are provided in the booklet, but if you can't find what you need, SHAC will endeavour to get it for you. Please email shac.action@gmail.com.

We wish all our housing warriors the best of luck.

The SHAC Team

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1. Using the Regulator of Social Housing's Powers

The Social Housing Regulation Act, come into effect from 1 April 2024. Alongside existing 'Standards' that landlords are already expected to adhere to, it introduced three new Standards under the Regulator of Social Housing's powers (RSH). These are:

- Safety and Quality Standard which concerns the safety and quality of tenants' homes. This could be used to address widespread disrepairs.
- Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard which concerns how landlords provide information, listen to tenants, and act on their views. This could be used where landlords fail to provide information without good reason, for example on service charges.
- Neighbourhood and Community Standard which concerns how landlords work with other organisations to help ensure tenants live in safe neighbourhoods. This could be used to challenge a landlord's failure to deal with anti-social behaviour for example.

How to approach it:

The Regulator doesn't work like a 'customer facing' service. It does not take up a case, investigate it, and report to the complainant on the outcome. Instead, it gathers data about landlords and then approaches them to address systemic (structural) problems. If they do not convince the RSH that sufficient action can be taken, they may be downgraded and this will make it harder for the landlord to get loans and enter into contracts. The RSH can now order an inspection to be carried out on the landlord.

The RSH's remit doesn't completely exclude leaseholders and shared owners, but they are far more heavily geared towards tenants. It is good to bear this in mind when approaching the RSH.

Action would involve the following steps:

- Gather a number of tenants and residents together all facing the same issue.
- Gather supporting and corroborating evidence that you can provide.
- Produce a report showing how the problems you are experiencing of a systemic failure, and directly demonstrate a breach of one of the RSH Standards. You can see the Regulatory Standards [here](#).

Support from SHAC:

SHAC can help by talking through what is needed at each stage, and can review any final complaint before it is submitted, or it can be submitted by SHAC on behalf of your group.

2. Collectively Challenge Service Charge Bills

This involves collecting data about inaccuracies in the bills for more than one property, and even tracking these for more than one year. This would then be submitted to the landlord to address the inaccuracies, and could form evidence for use with the Housing Ombudsman (to show that the landlord hasn't dealt with your complaint effectively) or First Tier Tribunal (to challenge the charges that are disputed).

How to approach it:

- Analyse the bills for different properties, different blocks, or different estates, especially using the items that are common to several properties.
- Ignore the smaller overcharges, and focus on the larger inaccuracies across the group.
- Compile the data into some form of spreadsheet or document that systematically explains why a charge is not valid or is unreasonably high. A template spreadsheet is available [here](#).
- If your landlord is a council, they are subject to the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act, giving you more power to get relevant data. Find out more about using the FoIA [here](#).
- Make sure you distinguish between charges for which you have questions, and those for which you know are inaccurate and therefore want removed from your bill. Be clear. For example, if your block does not have a concierge, there is no point asking the landlord why they have added this charge, just demand that it is removed because it is invalid. On the other hand, it may be that you do have a concierge, but the cost has risen by 30% in a year. That's not going to be the concierge's pay increase, so it is reasonable to force the landlord to justify the charge, and follow up with a request to reduce it if it is wrong.
- Once you have done the initial work of compiling the data, go back to any neighbours who weren't initially interested in joining the collective challenge when you first asked them. Show them what you have done and invite them to join in. Some people need to see hard evidence to be convinced.
- You can use the Find Others website to help you submit and escalate the challenge. It has pre-set templates and is easy to use.
- As well as sending the final document to the landlord, copy your councillors and MP, and SHAC. If the landlord takes too long to answer, fobs you off, or refuses to remove inaccurate charges, approach your councillors and MP to act on your behalf.
- Resist paying any charges that you believe are not legitimate or reasonable.
- For our members tips on taking a case to the First Tier Tribunal, see [here](#).

Support from SHAC:

SHAC can put you in touch with others who have submitted collective challenges.

3. Organise an Estate

3.1 Setting up a Tenants and Residents Association

Tenant and Resident Associations (TRAs) can act as the voice for those on an estate or in a block who have problems, and have other benefits. Steve chairs his One Housing (Riverside) TRA and says:

I felt the need to form a TRA as we were having constant battles about poor service provision and ever rising charges. Having a collective voice meant that not just one or two people were the named complainers all the time. As Chair of the TRA I frequently sign my emails to the landlord on behalf of the TRA, and over the last year or so I have noticed that letters to my home address are addressed to TRA.

Steve, TRA Chair

How to approach it

- Either start leafleting the estate with an outline of why you want to form a TRA and a way for people to get in touch if they are interested, or go from door to door with a neighbour and take down the name, email address, and phone number of those who want to be involved.
- At formation, it can be a challenge to engage others to take the role of chair, secretary and treasurer to give legitimacy. It can take a little press-ganging of those who have complained about issues previously to get them to take on the positions. Having a vice chair to fill in for chair if absent is also helpful.
- Adopt a constitution which sets out the rules for how the TRA will run. This will give it a level of authority with the landlord and other organisations like the Housing Ombudsman Service.
- Keep your committee small otherwise organising meetings can be challenging.
- Set up ways to communicate. There are lots of platforms that can be used, such as email, Facebook, and WhatsApp. The chair must show communication leadership. Apathy prevails and if you lapse others certainly will.
- Elect a committee of people who will be the most active in raising concerns with the landlord, with voting rights to make decisions in between meetings.

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- Compile a contact list of all those on the estate who want to be members of the TRA. These members wouldn't have voting rights.
- Set a limit on the amount of time you want to allocate per week so that it doesn't take over every spare minute.
- Even if your landlord does not endorse TRAs, form one anyway. If you continue to contact the landlord on behalf of the estate, they may come round at a later date.
- If your landlord formally recognises the TRA, they may provide a small pot of money for expenses such as room hire, printing and refreshments. If they don't, consider asking for a small subscription, even a pound a month per household soon builds up.

Support from SHAC:

SHAC has further guidance on setting up a TRA, plus useful templates for constitutions, agendas, and so-on available [here](#). We can also put you in touch with other active TRA members for peer support and advice. The organisation [Four Million Homes](#) also has support for TRAs.

3.2 Other Estate Organising

Feedback from members is that TRAs can be dominated by individual issues such as a leaking roof or broken boiler, and that it can be extremely difficult to get people to take on tasks, or agree a more strategic approach. There are alternatives to a TRA that can bypass some of these challenges.

How to approach it

- Set up an activist group bringing together those who want to take a more campaigning approach to hold the landlord to account, for example to improve their responsiveness to repair needs rather than just addressing them case by case.
- Leaflet the estate with SHAC leaflets to bring people into our orbit and help them understand both the need for more strategic organising, and move toward becoming activists.
- Organise an action like an open letter, petition, or protest to unite neighbours behind a strategic demand on the landlord, and then keep pushing them, involving your MP and councillors, and if it's a subject that the press might be interested in, sending out a press release.

- A protest outside the local landlord office or their head office.
- A collective complaint to your local MP asking them to intervene on your behalf.
- A collective complaint to the landlord, or the same complaint all submitted on the same day by multiple tenants and residents. The latter in particular involves more work for them because they have to address each individually, and pushes up the number of complaints that they have to report to their own board and the Regulator of Social Housing.

Support from SHAC:

SHAC can help with advice on all of these actions, including the design and printing of leaflets, and sending out a press release to our press list.

4. Withholding Payment Actions

SHAC supports members who withhold payment for whatever reason. This is ultimately the most powerful strategic action that we can take, especially when it is wrapped around with campaigning to raise awareness of the action and why it is being taken.

Members are understandably concerned that if they withhold payment, they will be evicted. This is certainly not our experience after supporting or being informed of hundreds who have taken this action, some for many years. However, every action involves some risk (as does inaction), so it is up to individuals to decide what they feel comfortable with. We also advise on ways to minimise the risk.

How to approach it

- **All Out Strikes** – this would involve everyone withholding payment and writing to inform the landlord on the same day, setting out the reasons and notifying them of when the payment strike will start.
- **Staggered Strikes** – this can feel less onerous, and would involve different blocks on an estate each taking it in turns to withhold payment for a month. For example, if there are three blocks on an estate, block A would withhold the January payment then continue in full for the next two months, block B would withhold in February, and block C in March. Then the cycle would begin again. It would disrupt payment, show collectivism, and make a powerful point to the landlord.

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- **Token Amount** – This again can feel safer but still have a big impact. It would involve everyone withholding a token amount, for example reducing their payments by £10 a month. When done collectively across an estate or group of strikers, this would still disrupt the income to the landlord and have an impact.

Support from SHAC:

Whichever method is used, we strongly advise working through the steps to safe striking set out in [SHAC's guidance](#) to maximise your power and minimise risk. Sending us details of your action means that we can write up an article for our website, press release it, and share it on social media. This provides exposure and also lets the landlord know that you have the backing of the housing campaign sector.

5. Engaging With Landlord Executives

SHAC has supported delegates to meet with the executives of MTVHA, L&Q, Peabody, Hyde, Southern, Clarion, NHG, THCH, and Riverside / One Housing. This is done democratically and collectively, and is used to discuss strategic changes that are needed to improve standards for all, rather than discussing individual or specific estate issues. It is a way of conveying demands to landlords directly.

How to approach it

- The group first needs to meet to agree the main strategic demands and elect the delegation. Four to five people is optimum.
- The delegates meet to agree a script or crib sheet to make sure that everyone stays on track. The script needs to set out the timings for each delegate's contribution.
- The script is sent out to the full group to make sure it covers all the points that members want raised.
- A meeting is organised between delegates and the executive.
- After the meeting, the delegates report back to the full group which agrees on next steps.

Tips from Members who have been through this process include:

- Make sure you are specific and get to the root causes of the issues. The executives will want to divide the group by asking about individual issues, so you need to keep restating the strategic points.

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- Avoid personal issues and individual situations. The demands being made need to be for structural and strategic change.
- Be specific not vague. For example, just asking for improvements will allow them to say that they have fulfilled this (because it's open to wide interpretation). Instead, spell out the actual improvements you want.
- Be very firm and business like, but always stay civil and professional. They will use any excuse to say you are being aggressive and therefore dismiss your delegation.
- Bear in mind that the staff already know what the issues are and you will have very limited time to cover a lot of ground. It is best to state the problems very briefly and spend valuable time on what you want to change. Deal with the causes, not the symptoms.

Support from SHAC:

- SHAC can organise online meetings for groups wanting to meet their landlord's executive, and to report back afterwards. We can contact the executives on your behalf, and provide sample scripts used by other groups to tailor to your own needs.

6. Other Actions

There are lots of ways to collectively organise, and this will always have a greater impact than individual actions. Some other suggestions include:

SHAC can offer advice based on the experience of others who have taken similar action, and help with reasonable costs. Contact us at shac.action@gmail.com for advice.

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Email shac.action@gmail.com

Website www.shaction.org

Facebook www.facebook.com/groups/www.shaction.org

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