



Tenants' Unions

A tenants' union can be an effective means through which to challenge poor housing regulation and unscrupulous landlords, based on a simple principle that tenants have more power collectively than individually. This briefing will detail what a tenants' union is, steps to set one up and the challenges students could face.

Introduction

The principle behind tenants' unions is that collective action focused on specific tenants' issues will be more effective in achieving change than individual tenants attempting to solve their problems. The aim is primarily to ensure that tenants receive fit and proper housing.

Further to this, tenants' unions seek to make tenants more aware of their ability to question and challenge the decisions of their landlords or their agents and to make them feel more empowered in their relationship with their housing provider.

Often tenants' unions are set up in reaction to a deterioration in standards or practices and usually are set up by a small number of tenants against a particular landlord or set of landlords. Recently more tenants' unions have established themselves, which often cover larger geographical areas. This is mainly due to increasingly high rents, largely unregulated lettings agents and under resourcing in local authorities to enforce housing standards. This has resulted in a sense of powerlessness in the private rented sector which tenants' unions aim to combat.

The primary function of a tenants' union is to advocate on behalf of their members whether individually or as a collective. That being said most tenants' unions perform a number of functions for their members. Depending on the individual circumstance this usually includes local and national campaigning, advice and information (often provided in an informal, drop-in or peer support type setting) and sometimes legal advice.

In recent years, there has been increasing interest within the student movement in the potential for tenants' unions to be something that students' unions can play an active part in establishing and supporting. This is particularly in response to increasingly prevalent issues in the private rented sector such as problems with housing conditions, letting agent fees (outside Scotland) and high housing costs.



Starting a tenants' union

We spoke to some existing tenants' unions to find out how they would advise students' unions to go about setting up a tenants' union. Some of their top tips are listed below.

1. Be clear of your aims

Once your students' union or group of students have decided to set up a tenants' union, make sure that you have clear and concise aims. It is better to stick with a handful of achievable aims rather than a vague and long list of demands.

2. Assign roles and responsibilities

Although it may seem to run counter to the spirit of something as open and inclusive as a tenants' union, you are much more likely to get things done effectively if everyone is clear on the part they need to play. Clearly defined roles will help people to understand what is expected of them, ensure that no one is stepping on each other's toes, and foster a culture of accountability.

3. Be honest about your capacity

Once you have assigned your roles, it is important to ensure that you are realistic about what you can achieve and by when. You will be a small, and probably mostly voluntary collective of people, and depending on expertise, you are unlikely to be able to start running legal surgeries straight away.

4. Consider formalising your structure

One way to avoid over exerting a new tenants' union is to formalise its scope, remit and structure in initial meetings. You may need to wait a while before initiating this process to see how things bed down. An example of a tenants' union charter is available from the International Union of Tenants'. There are three key aspects to this type of charter: access to suitable accommodation, housing quality and tenant rights and participation.

5. Build partnerships

Once you have identified your role as a tenants' union, and considered what some of your limitations might be, you can look to fill them by forging links with other local groups. If you have an advice centre within your students'

union, running a housing drop-in as part of the tenants' union's activities could be a great way to get people interested and involved. It might also be helpful to start contacting organisations in the voluntary sector locally to see if there is support or funding that they can offer or direct you to. There might also be a local umbrella body for the voluntary sector which can provide you with support. Generation Rent, the umbrella which supports local tenants' unions and private renters groups are able to support with those developing their tenants' unions, their contact details are in the resources section.

6. Develop an understanding of the local situation

To be effective, tenants' unions need to be armed with the facts. Find out as much as you can about the local housing situation and how it fits into the national context. You might also want to find out what your local council's current strategy is in relation to the private rented sector. If there is not much data available, you could consider running a survey of students, or working with other local tenants' groups to survey local renters more widely.

7. Consider expanding your scope

Obviously a tenants' union which is primarily set up by and has core aims relevant to students will be slightly different to those for all tenants in the private rented sector. However, this doesn't mean that your tenants' union can't involve all tenants either straight away, or after a period of time initially working just with students. Additionally, if there are other tenants' groups in the area, you could create links with them and this can help to generate greater collective power amongst tenants.

8. Find opportunities to get new members involved

Consider ways that you can get people interested in joining your tenants' union. One popular idea is to work with first year students in halls of residence, when they can be easier to make contact with. You can then provide support to them as they move into the private rented sector, and encourage continued involvement. Offering something useful for free

is also a good way of attracting interest, so consider whether you can provide training, advice or support. Sometimes just being able to meet other tenants in a similar situation can provide a real sense of empowerment.

9. Once they're there, keep them on board

Some tenants' unions have found that a key challenge is keeping members involved. Running regular public meetings with open and transparent means of decision making can help to maintain participation. If people show an interest, try to find a role that enables them to use their strengths and play a part. This could be as small or large as they feel able to manage, but some degree of commitment can help prevent people dropping out.

10. Remember what you're there for

Some members may get frustrated if you're not able to solve their housing issue, but try to find ways to harness these feelings into positive campaigning aimed at changing things for the better. Be clear on your boundaries if you're going to talk to journalists – building relationships with them can be useful, but be aware that you will have little control over what is eventually published. Try to ensure that your campaign will be mentioned, rather than just the issue that is likely to draw the most attention, and be clear on what the boundaries are if you're sharing members' personal stories.



Tenants protest outside a letting agent as part of the Let Down campaign

Tenants' unions: Examples and resources

There are a number of tenants' unions in existence that have quickly established a strong campaigning presence for their members. You may find it useful to consider the ways that established unions work when considering how to go about setting up yours. There are also a number of organisations who can provide support and resources to new tenants' unions.

EPTAG

EPTAG, the [Edinburgh Private Tenants' Action Group](#) is an example of an effective tenants' union. Set up in 2011, EPTAG represents private tenants across Edinburgh and is the only organisation devoted to private tenants in the city. EPTAG is run solely by volunteers and takes a small membership fee in order to run campaigns and produce materials.

The focus of their current campaigns is on rolling tenancy, as well as campaigns against illegal letting agent fees and how to claim them back. They also provide guidance regarding making small claims against landlords, with a high profile win against a particular Edinburgh landlord who consistently intimidated his tenants, culminating in his removal from Edinburgh's list of fit and proper landlords.

Hackney Renters

[Hackney Renters](#) was set up in 2012 to represent tenants in the London borough of Hackney. They have four clear aims: free and fair access to the housing market, tenure security, independently regulated landlords and lettings agents, and tenants' rights to high housing standards. Hackney Renters is different to EPTAG in that it has no membership fee.

Islington Private Tenants

[Islington Private Tenants](#) describes itself as an information, support and advocacy group run by tenants, for tenants in the London borough of Islington. They aim to ensure that local tenants know their rights, and that information can be passed on to the local council and other services so that they can better understand renters' experiences. They also encourage tenants to support each other, and work with

them to get organised and make their voices heard, particularly when new legislation or consultations arise. The group has a formal constitution, and operates as a small charity.

London Renters

Hackney Renters and Islington Private Tenants are part of a burgeoning tenant activist movement across London, and part of the umbrella group, London Renters. One of their major projects is the [Let Down campaign](#), targeting poor practice amongst letting agents.

Generation Rent

Formerly known as the National Private Tenants' Organisation, [Generation Rent](#) is an organisation which campaigns with private renters for professionally managed, secure, decent and affordable privately rented homes. They provide support to local renters groups and currently work with groups across the country. They have staff dedicated to supporting emerging tenants groups and encourages students interested to email info@generationrent.org. They also work nationally to improve policy in favour of private tenants.

International Union of Tenants

You may also be interested in information provided by the [International Union of Tenants](#), the world-wide body for tenants' unions.

This briefing forms part of a series, which will be released by NUS throughout the year to help students' unions develop their work on key housing issues and campaigns.

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