

NCF Resident Representative Case Study: Linda

Linda is involved with:

Resident Representative for the North
Neighbourhood Consultative Forum
Vice Chair of the Dyke
House/Stranton/Grange NAP Forum
Member of the Hartlepool LINK

Why did you decide to join as a Resident Representative?

Because I thought it important that residents have a voice in what is happening and I think that councillors and officers can lose sight as to why they are there at times.

What did you need to do to become a Resident Representative? Did you find it difficult?

Not really, it was more difficult the second time round because they changed the procedure. The first time I became a resident rep you were elected by the Neighbourhood Consultative Forum (NCF) but for the second time round you now have to go through the same procedure as a councillor. You need 10 signatures from people for your nomination as a resident rep. The second time round it was slightly more daunting because it was a case of explaining what the role was to people before people could sign.

What do you do as part of your role as a Resident Representative?

All sorts, from the second term of office we were given opportunity to sit on the various Scrutiny forums in the council which hadn't been done in the past. That was a big challenge, because elected members were nervous of the resident reps coming along. Although we are elected it is not by the same number that is required for councillors, and there are a lot of statutory requirements for councillors but not for resident reps. Councillors were not sure who would be coming to the meetings and what they would be like. It was a challenge to ensure that we could all work together and that we as reps were there to enhance the councillors' role not to challenge it.

The resident representative's role is to work with the ward councillor, because no ward councillor can be everywhere, no matter how hard you try. So there are some issues that people can come to me with and I can deal with them, but there are some other issues that are outside of my remit and would need to go to a councillor. As a resident rep you have to know where your boundaries are and when to pass it to a councillor so they can use their expertise and knowledge to solve the problem.

Is it difficult to fit your role as a Resident Representative in with the rest of your life?

Not really, I'm the secretary of a local resident association so I get a lot of information from there and I attend the NCF and I am involved with the Hartlepool LINK. You pick up what is going on from everywhere and you can feed this in to your role as resident rep and it helps you to do your job.

If you just attend the NCF and Scrutiny you will find it difficult, as you do need the contact with residents.

People need to know who they can contact, sadly with some residents there is still mistrust with elected councillors which is a shame as many ward councillors are very good and do a great job. It only takes a few to ruin the good work of many though. So some residents will come to me as I am not paid and they know I am not an elected councillor, so only work to make things better for residents and not to gain personally.

At the end of the day it doesn't matter who sorts the problem out, as long as the problem goes away for the resident. So whether it's me who solves it or a councillor, it doesn't matter about the credit. My focus is on making life better for residents.

What do you enjoy about being a Resident Representative?

It's seeing the changes, seeing things improving. As secretary of a residents association I can track where problems have been and see how they have been solved. However, had I only been involved in just a residents group I would not have got all the knowledge I have acquired from being a resident rep and it's this knowledge that has allowed me to make the changes- you learn the procedures and who to go to. I would not have that expertise if I were not a resident rep.

What are the difficulties about being a Resident Representative?

Occasionally people think we can do more than we actually can. I think there is disappointment when they think something will be done over night and then it can't be. I am not sure why they would think that but things often can't be solved so quickly. Life doesn't work like that unfortunately and most things take longer because the wheels of government turn slowly which can be frustrating for us and for residents.

Would you recommend being a Resident Representative to other people?

I certainly would. I have certainly enjoyed the role and I think if you want to get involved in your area but not as far as standing in a local election then it is certainly a way to go. It is a huge learning curve when you start and you have to

adapt to the terminology and the way it works but once you are in the role it can really be enlightening.

There was training initially although the amount of training available now is less, although this is something that will be hopefully changed with the new election.

The appointment of new resident reps now fall in line with the local elections so we come on board about the same time as the local councillors so everyone comes into the new work together. That has made a huge difference, as it is easier to follow because you are not playing catch up. It makes life easier.

This was something I asked to change because resident reps used to join in October and you were always trying to catch up. The change went through easily after a suggestion I made and it does show that they do listen to you and take your opinion of value.

I certainly feel that we have a strong voice; I know that sometimes people feel that they are not as valued as they should be but that is down to different expectations from individuals.

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