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What is a voluntary organisation?

Basic info

Regulation 2 of the Housing Benefit Regulations 2006 defines a voluntary organisation as “a body, other than a public or local authority, the activities of which are carried on otherwise than for profit”.

The term “body” is wide enough to cover different kinds of organisation: a company, a society, a partnership or an unincorporated association.

Example

In 2008 a group of friends from the Somali community in a large English city wanted to help newly recognised refugees to integrate into British life: they felt that their knowledge of the issues affecting refugees in general and Somali men in particular would enable them to provide expert support together with accommodation. They decided to found an organisation devoted to that purpose. The founders leased a few houses through a letting agent and drew up a list of aims and principles. They chose a name for their venture but at this stage they did not form a company and they did not register with the Charity Commission. The leases of the properties were granted by the owners to the founders personally. The founders in turn granted their clients licences to occupy rooms in the houses and charged them enough to cover their outgoings. They provided support in their spare time and did not take any personal salary.

The only way they could satisfy the landlord requirements for “exempt accommodation” was as a “voluntary organisation”:

- They were clearly not a non-metropolitan county council
- Nor did they have a registered charity
- There was no company or society; nor was there any trust deed or trust property, therefore they did not satisfy the definition of “housing association” (a “company, society or body of trustees...”)

But as a group of people operating under an agreed set of principles they were arguably sufficiently constituted to be regarded as a “body” and, therefore, as a “voluntary organisation”.