



# Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations

Bells Gardens Community Centre,  
19 Buller Close, London,

Campaigning for Housing Rights and Council Homes

SE15 6UJ

## Group Meeting Minutes

Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> May 7 – 8:30pm

**Attendance:** 19

**Staff:** Margaret Onwuta, Amanda Carey, Ahmed Kabba, Rita Edmond, Jack Lewis

### 1. Welcome, Introduction, and apologies

Cris Claridge (Chair) introduced herself and Chris Meregini (Vice Chair). Cris proposed that the two guest speakers present first, before moving on to other items on the agenda.

No apologies recorded.

### 2. Gosia Kaczmarczyk | Community Engagement Officer

Healthwatch Southwark | Community Southwark

Gosia introduced herself and explained that she would also be using slides alongside her presentation.

Gosia explained that local healthwatches were established by the Health and Social Care Act, and are statutory organisations. Healthwatch Southwark was founded by the local authority but is independent of them. It is hosted by Community Southwark. Their vision is for Southwark residents to be able to access and receive the best possible health and social care services and influence the services they receive. They provide information and signposting, so whoever comes to them can receive guidance on the services that are available to them, and on how to make a complaint. They cannot provide medical advice. They work with community organisations, and keep abreast of information that may be of benefit to patients, which they pass on to them. They promote patient and service user involvement in healthcare. This includes engagement with service providers and decision-making boards. Decision-makers have to work with Healthwatch as it is a statutory organisation.

Their community engagement is both in-person and online. Their 'Enter and View' programme allows them to enter a healthcare facility and interview patients and staff, creating a report which contains recommendations. They work with providers to improve services, using (for example) consultation and monitoring to do this.

Healthwatch wants to know what matters to residents, and that is why Gosia hopes to work with TRAs. Working with TRAs can help Healthwatch reach more residents, enabling them to find out what their priorities are in terms of healthcare provision. Using this feedback, they can look into



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individual systems issues. The Healthwatch team is small so relies on working with residents to reach more people.

The Healthwatch Advisory Board is open to residents – it monitors Healthwatch and helps it set priorities. Other roles are advertised on their website. They are keen to recruit volunteers that are local to the opportunities Healthwatch are advertising. This provides direct community links.

Gosia mentioned a number of events coming up in May and June:

- Support in Southwark: Change Grow Live – 26<sup>th</sup> May 3-4pm

This event helps victims of drug and alcohol abuse.

- Complaints and Advocacy – Signposting Clinic – 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2-3pm

This evolved from the multiple issues members of the public were coming to Healthwatch with. This event links them directly with the relevant Council teams, giving them an opportunity to speak with them.

- Carers Awareness Event – 23<sup>rd</sup> June 3-4:30pm

Each month's awareness event has a different theme: this time it is Carers. A previous theme was mental health, for example.

- Mindfulness and Relaxation – 28<sup>th</sup> June 5-6pm
- Radical Mindfulness – 30<sup>th</sup> June 3-4pm

These two events are run by volunteers and are open to all people in the borough of Southwark.

Healthwatch has a monthly newsletter and also sends out regular updates on health and social care. They also send out updates on their events.

How to get in touch with Healthwatch:

- Phone number: 020 3848 6546
- Email address: [info@healthwatchesouthwark.org](mailto:info@healthwatchesouthwark.org)
- Website: [www.healthwatchesouthwark.org](http://www.healthwatchesouthwark.org)

Gosia said that she would be happy to attend TRA meetings to further discuss Healthwatch.

Cris suggested that Gosia send relevant information and literature, along with an invitation for residents to contact Gosia, to Margaret, who can ensure this is shared with the membership.

Damien commented that "Great presentation, interested in the subject, especially mindfulness, I'm helping a few people that need a pick me up, but in all of this time, I've found care givers like me, sometimes (also) fall down a bit. Help to get back up is welcomed."



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Gosia encouraged Damien to attend the Carers event next month, which will give more information on what support is available for carers.

**Action:** Gosia to send relevant information on Healthwatch to Margaret.

**Action:** SGTO Staff Team to share this information with members.

### 3. **Shaunna - Community Co-ops** - to help set up projects with groups of residents & tenants across Southwark

Shaunna works at Cooperation Town, which is a network of community food co-ops. She has been participating in community work for a long time, and set up a food co-op on her street. Cooperation Town spotted this and asked her to work for them, helping others set up their own co-ops. Co-ops allow people to save a third on their food shopping while also building community, working together to save money. 30 food co-ops exist within the Cooperation Town network, including several in Southwark. Shaunna is working on the Silwood Estate's food co-op.

Many people know about food banks: surplus food is given by supermarkets, and the food is collected and distributed to food banks. People sometimes feel embarrassed going to a foodbank, but they should not as we are going through a cost-of-living crisis. The foodbank model is well-intentioned, but it creates a divide between the volunteers running the foodbank and the people who use it. COVID saw an influx of well-meaning middle-class volunteers who might make those using the foodbank feel self-conscious.

Poverty does not mean you cannot help others in your community. The co-op model means all people put work in to ensure the co-op functions. Cooperation Town trains people up to ensure their co-op can function. This is what Shaunna has been working on in the Silwood Estate. Community members volunteer to do different things. Co-ops contain up to 20 households per co-op. If there are more, the co-op divides and creates a further co-op. More than 20 households and it is difficult to organise a shopping list, and after you exceed 20, it is possible that some members would no longer have organising roles. It is important that all those involved have active roles. Everyone involved in the co-op has to live at most a 20-minute walk from where the food is packed: the idea is to build community on a micro level. The conversations this generates encourages mutual support in other ways, such as childcare. The access to the food is free and a co-op model allows a community to adapt to the food needs of its members. They can devise a shopping list and buy in bulk, saving money. The idea started 108 years ago in Rochdale and separately in other countries, but is being revived now due to the cost-of-living crisis. It builds community while also saving money. It takes some encouragement to move people away from a food bank model, but it is rewarding. You learn about community conflict and negotiation through running the co-op: it makes people more considerate towards each other. For example: Shaunna saw childless families giving their portions of food to families with children, who might need it more.



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Bells Gardens Community Centre,  
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SE15 6UJ

## Campaigning for Housing Rights and Council Homes

Shaunna shared links in the chat to a starter pack for establishing a co-op.

Cris asked how the Silwood co-op started.

Shaunna said that after the estate's community centre was re-opened, she went along and set up a stall there, with mangoes from the Felix Foundation. Shaunna had 85 one-to-one conversations about the cost of food with residents. She then door-knocked across the estate and organised a community meeting, followed by a fun day.

Cris encouraged Shaunna to attend community events to talk with residents.

Beverley asked how Shaunna got funding for the co-op.

Shaunna clarified that you don't need external funding to start a co-op – it is self-funded. Cooperation Town's training is free to residents who want to set one up. A co-op could look for funding and could even run itself entirely using free food, but bulk buying does save money. The average family using a food co-op spends between £3.50 and £10 per week on food. This is instead of regular food shopping.

Dario asked what the minimum required number of households is to run a co-op.

Shaunna said that you need at least 10 households, because you need to bulk buy and organise labour. But Shaunna said reaching this number shouldn't be a challenge.

Jack asked how many food co-ops operate in Southwark

Shaunna clarified that there are two currently running in Southwark, including the one on the Silwood Estate. Pecan had got in touch with Cooperation Town asking for help in Southwark. Cooperation Town started in 2019 and now has 30 co-ops in total, but early on in the organisation's lifespan it had to engage in COVID-19 response work. It has a community centre in Camden. Shaunna hopes that the SGTO can promote food co-ops widely in Southwark.

Cris thanked Shaunna for coming.

**Action:** Shaunna to write to Margaret with a template letter, informing TRAs that she would be happy to come to their meetings to share information.

**Action:** SGTO Staff Team to disseminate this information to the membership.



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SE15 6UJ

## 4. Cabinet Member for Housing 2022 - 2023 Question & Answer session

Cris explained that Stephanie Cryan had assured her that she would remain the Cabinet Member for Council Housing after the Local Elections. But this was not the case and after Darren Merrill was announced as the Cabinet Member a few days before the meeting, it was too late to get Darren to attend at such short notice.

## 5. Minutes of Group Meeting held on 23rd February & 30th March 2022 and Matters Arising

The minutes from the Group Meeting held on 23<sup>rd</sup> February were agreed as a true record. Proposed: Chris Meregini. Seconded: Beverley Graham.

Cris recorded two actions from this meeting. One was for Jack Lewis, who had agreed to arrange a meeting with Jordan Creed, Social Action and Communities Officer at Community Southwark, to discuss the possibility of joining up to carry out campaigns across the borough.

Jack clarified that while he had not had a virtual or in-person meeting, he had spoken with Jordan over the phone several times and whenever Jordan promotes opportunities in Community Southwark that might interest SGTO members, Jack shares these with members, and vice versa for Community Southwark's membership.

Cris mentioned that the other action was for Christine Brennan, Head of Repairs at Southwark Council, to report back on repairs issues raised by residents at the February Group Meeting. Margaret confirmed that she had not heard from Christine.

Cris mentioned that the meeting in March was not a usual Group Meeting but an informal, conversational meeting, meaning the minutes did not require formal approval.

**Action:** Chase Christine Brennan for a response to resident concerns.

## 6. Cancelled Hustings April 2022

Cris reminded residents that members had been told that the hustings were cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances. These circumstances were that the SGTO received a phone call from then Liberal Democrat Councillor Damien O'Brien, conveying a message from his own party, the Green Party and the Labour Party that representatives of these parties refused to speak at the hustings due to Piers Corbyn accepting an invitation to speak at the hustings. Cris said that this put us in a difficult position, as the SGTO had invited speakers from all parties standing in Southwark, and the call from Damien was only two days before the hustings was due to take place. If more notice had been given, the SGTO could have spoken with the membership and agreed a course of action. But at short notice, the SGTO did not want to engage in a political argument over attendance. Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party had agreed to put their reasoning in writing, but that was not forthcoming. The letter we did receive was not signed by the Liberal Democrats.

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*SE15 6UJ*

Cris wants to see what the memberships' view is of this situation.

Chris Meregini agreed that there was no point of the SGTO getting involved in political wrangling. The lateness of the information made what happened inevitable. Going forward, the SGTO can learn from this experience, and provide more notice of candidates' attendance to all other candidates.

June asked whether it is normal for other parties to refuse to not speak on the same platform as certain individuals.

Cris said it was not normal, but had wished that the SGTO had received further notice and the reasoning behind the candidates' decision. The only comparison Cris could think of was when at a General Election Hustings organised by the SGTO, none of the other candidates wanted to sit next to the UKIP speaker.

June said that if other candidates had known in advance that they did not want to speak with Piers, they should have given more notice.

Cris expressed disappointment that members missed out on an opportunity to question politicians.

Tanya recognised how difficult the SGTO's position was. She asked who else we had invited.

Jack said that the SGTO set out to invite every party standing in Southwark, which is what we did. Invitations were sent to the Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, the Green Party, the Women's Equality Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Trades Union and Socialist Coalition, and Let London Live (Piers Corbyn's party). Jack also tried to reach out to some independents but could not locate contact information for them.

Tanya mentioned how she had previously organised hustings. Looking at the guidance from the Electoral Commission guidance. You are meant to invite every party standing but if you spend less than £2,000 on a hustings, the Electoral Commission guidance is unlikely to be enforced. On that basis, Tanya did not invite UKIP to the ward bye-election hustings she was organising at the time. There is a precedent here that you don't have to open up your platform to people with (for example) objectionable or racist views. Piers Corbyn has expressed some objectionable views in the past and has shared platforms with fascists. Tanya probably would not have invited him had she been organising the hustings. On the other hand, Tanya expressed her outrage at the fact that three parties send a verbal message via one person, refusing to go on a platform with a person two days before the hustings. This does not display much respect for ordinary people who would have wanted to attend the hustings.

Shaun asked whether independents were invited. He mentioned that Piers had only stood in one ward, Faraday Ward. Shaun questioned whether he would be representative of borough-wide concerns. He suggested that invited parties should have to have a certain number of candidates in different wards.





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Cris agreed with Shaun but also mentioned that SGTO had not been put in this position before.

Tanya recognised how objectionable Piers' views might be, but also recognised that parties were not refusing to talk on the same platform as a Reform UK speaker, who could equally be viewed as objectionable. Arguably, Reform UK has more power and significance. Tanya argued that it is suspect that they find Piers more objectionable than Reform UK.

## 7. **Future Funding for the SGTO** update/ **Tenants' Conference in September**

Chris Meregini said that the Council had not provided definitive answers on funding. The SGTO thought Stephanie Cryan would remain in post. The SGTO has asked the Council for a one-year extension of the funding package. This proposal will be taken to the Cabinet. Chris stated that we might get this extension, which would take our funding package to September 2023. Chris mentioned that the SGTO was set up by residents and it is for residents. Chris wants to see what the members' views are of the Council's proposals.

Cris mentioned that if they refuse to give us a further year, the SGTO have requested a further meeting with the Council. The contract the Council continue to propose for after our funding finishes remains an advice agency contract, which is very different to a tenants' federation. The SGTO has drafted a letter from Cris, which has been sent to all of Southwark's councillors. It outlines the SGTO's history and its current work. This went out yesterday, and it invited the councillors to our June Group Meeting, so we can discuss the SGTO's argument against tendering us as an advice agency, and encourage councillors to defend our position.

Jack outlined how three councillors have accepted the invitation so far, and that the new Cabinet Member for Council Housing has also been invited.

Cris said that Darren Merrill, the new Cabinet Member, had accepted. Cris understands that some councillors have a training session on the same day, so if we do not get a large enough response, we can invite councillors to a separate meeting. This meeting would focus on discussing what a tenants federation is.

Chris Meregini added that we need councillors to recognise the challenges we are facing. The SGTO is trying to protect the interests of its members. Often we are campaigning against the Council, and now the Council want to dismantle us and our occasionally oppositional voice. This new advice agency would not be able to oppose the Council and would not be able to fight and defend the needs of residents. SGTO members need to raise their voices now to oppose Council actions. We need to get enough facts and support to defend ourselves.

Cris mentioned that we want to organise a tenants' conference for September. She mentioned that the boroughwide membership need to show the Council that a tenants federation is still required in Southwark. Residents need to demand that the SGTO remains. The Council are calling their own tenants' conference in November. Cris suggested that for the Council's conference, there is a lot of



# Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations

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SE15 6UJ

repetition of what we have ourselves done at previous SGTO conferences. Cris asked whether members would support the idea of us having a conference in September, and using it as the basis for demands that the Council maintain the SGTO as a tenants federation.

Tanya supported the conference as an idea, but said she doesn't do in-person meetings so hoped that we would be able to do a hybrid event.

June asked that this conference idea be put in writing and sent to TRAs, so they can discuss it and respond.

Cris emphasised that this conference must be widely supported, as it needs to be well-attended in order to act as a show of support for the SGTO.

Jack mentioned that he had attended a meeting of community groups in Rotherhithe earlier in the week – resident groups from across the SE16 area had been represented. This had reminded him of the sheer number of community groups and TRAs working in isolation, and that it is so important to get people together to link up their work into a broader movement for change. This includes TRAs but also individual residents and community groups, and that our conference has the potential to draw all of these people together.

Members voted unanimously for the conference to go ahead. Cris emphasised that this could be a hybrid event. Cris is keen to ensure that the conference takes place outside of Peckham, as the SGTO has previously been accused of holding too many of its events in Peckham as opposed to other parts of the borough. Cris suggested that a more centrally located venue be procured, and that members should come forward if they know of a TRA Hall that could be used for this purpose. Cris stressed that we do not have a huge amount of money to spend on venue hire, and a TRA hosting the event would save money. Cris mentioned that Elephant and Castle had been proposed as an area that is easy for a lot of people to get to.

Althea had also previously mentioned the Ministry of Sound as a possible venue, which she will look into.

**Action:** SGTO Staff, Board Members and interested residents to plan for a September conference.

8. Any Other Business - None received.

Cris thanked all those who attended.