



Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations

Campaigning for Housing Rights and Council Homes

*Bells Gardens Community Centre
19 Buller Close, London
SE15 6UJ*

Group Meeting Minutes from Wednesday 22nd February 2023 on zoom

Staff: Margaret Onwuta, Amanda Carey, Ahmed Kabba

Attendees: 24

Apologies: Kiri Pieri, Paul Wright, Al-issa Munu, Carol Vincent, Peter Holmes, Emmanuel Ojomo, Colin Harrison

1. Welcome & Introductions

Chris welcomed everyone to the meeting and advised that there was an item missing from the agenda, which was Will from Cooperation Town. (www.cooperation.town) (will@cooperation.town)

Will advised that they are a network of community food co-ops who started a couple of years ago and have received funding from Southwark Council and Peckham Pecan to work with groups within the Southwark borders.

A food co-op is group of 20-30 people who give around £5.00-£10.00 each, they then find a wholesaler, supermarket to bulk buy items from a given joint shopping list to then share out to reduce the cost. Cooperation Town have funding to help with the first shop and to help buy fridges. There are two parts for the scheme:

1. The paid food comes from Wholesalers: Costco, food markets etc. anywhere where items can be bought at cost price.
2. Food co-ops can register with the Felix project, who obtain surplus food and give it out for free to food banks and pantries, but you can register your food co-op as it is a community group to get a delivery from them or arrange collection.

Your food co-op decides how much you each contribute and make your own shopping lists and only those who contribute, get the items.

You can contact Will to discuss how to set up, best place to set up, and the need for it on your estates.

Dodson & Amigo, Rockingham and JMB Leathermarket are in the process of setting up so far.

Will said that they have enough funding to set up 5 co-ops to get them started for first shop, before they have to make own financial contributions.

2. Minutes of Group Meeting held on 25th January 2023 and Matters Arising

Agreed as a true record

Proposed by Cris Claridge

Seconded by Saidat Oketunde

Matters Arising

Actions from October minutes:

People to be co-opted onto the Repairs Conference Group, in addition to existing group who were on Tenants Conference committee.

Additional members:

Barry Duckett

Alpha Sankoh

The purpose of the group is to organise a conference: date, time, where, who to invite etc. With current SGTO staff situation, Cris has agreed to coordinate first meeting to get it started and will liaise with Margaret.

Action: Cris to liaise with Margaret to arrange first Repairs Conference Meeting.

Actions from December minutes:

The letter to the council to ask what is happening with the SGTO funding was sent to Darren Merrill, who just passed it onto Nat Stevens, who provided a response, below:

Dear Chris

I am writing in response to your email and to clarify and confirm as follows:

1. The February 2020 Cabinet Report on resident participation, link provided for ease of reference <https://modern.gov.southwark.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspxCId=302&MIId=6419> committed the council to providing funding for independent advice and advocacy services for both homeowners and tenants (including council residents more broadly). Specifically, what was proposed was to transition from the provision of an annual grant fund to existing providers of such services (Citizens Advice Southwark [CAS], for homeowners, Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations [SGTO] for tenants and residents broadly), to formal commissioning of such services through the procurement and award of three-year contracts.
2. The commissioning would provide a greater degree of financial stability to the service providers, and greater clarity – for both the council and service-users – around the services provided, and the standards relating to such services. In addition, and in accordance with the supplemental advice from the Director of Law and Democracy, a period of 6 months was allowed for contract procurement to take place, and so 1 October 2020 was the anticipated start date for the new contracts, with both SGTO and CAS receiving funding extensions in the interim.
3. Paragraphs 90 and 91 sets out the financial arrangements agreed by Cabinet in February 2020 reproduced here again for ease of reference:

Final proposal

1. The council will establish a new **Resident Participation Fund**, this will replace the current Tenants Fund, Homeowners Fund and TRISG grants. The total funding will be increased from £860,000 to £900,000. This fund will need to benefit people who live in council homes as it will be funded by tenants and homeowners. It will fund the following activities:

i. Half (£450,000) will go to grassroots activity to fund:

a. **Core Grants for TRAs** (currently £178,000): These are grants paid annually to all fully established TRAs covering council homes. The amount TRAs receive will be unchanged. TRAs covering 240 or less tenancies will continue to receive £1,300, with TRAs covering more than 240 tenancies continuing to receive an additional £5.50 per tenancy as is currently the case.

b. **Resident Participation Small Grants (£272,000):** This will provide funding for small grants of up to £5,000 to support projects and activities that bring tenants and residents together and improve their wellbeing. These grants will fund projects and activities that primarily benefit people who live in council owned homes. Applications will be open to established and emerging TRAs and TMOs as well as constituted local groups that can evidence that the application has been developed by and for people living in council homes. Decisions on the grants will be made by the Cabinet Member for Housing Management and Modernisation based on recommendations from a panel of tenant and resident representatives.

ii. **Half (£450,000) will cover Southwark wide activity.** Decisions on this funding will be made by the Cabinet Member for Housing Management and Modernisation based on recommendations from the Joint Tenants and Homeowners Forum, this will include funding for:

a. Independent Support and Advice Services (£260,000): This will fund Southwark wide independent support and advice services for council tenants and resident homeowners, including those provided by Southwark Group of Tenant Organisations as well as other advice services. **These services will be commissioned on behalf of tenants and residents by the council based on priorities set by the Joint Tenants and Homeowners Forum in consultation with wider tenants and resident homeowners. It is anticipated that this will be through multi-year contracts. The council will work with the Joint Tenants and Home Owners Forum to monitor the performance of these services.**

b. **Training (£100,000)**, to support the active participation of tenants and residents in their local community, including training that support people to set up and run all aspects of TRAs

c. **Other resident participation activities (£50,000)**, including meetings, conferences and travel and other activities that support effective resident participation

d. **Administration of the above grants/contracts (£40,000)**

2. To provide time for the commissioning of contracts for independent support and advice services, the current grants for these services from the tenants and homeowners funds to the Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations and Citizens Advice Bureau will be extended for a further six months to the 31 September 2020 with funding from the new Resident Participation Fund.

3. Currently the formula for TRA Core Grants requires a budget of £178,000, if more homes were to be covered by TRAs in future, funding for the Resident Participation Small Grants will need to be reduced to cover this cost.

4. Paragraph 139 of the Cabinet report sets out parts of the legal advice which stipulates that the value of the contract demands that the contract is advertised via a publicly advertised competitive tendering process, **"With regards to paragraph 90.ii.a concerning the proposed procurement of external independent support and advice services, the council's Contract Standing Orders ("CSOs") state that, where the estimated contract value is above the applicable EU threshold for services, there is a requirement to comply with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 following a publicly advertised competitive tendering process."**

5. The role of the resident involvement team is to act on the agreed position of Cabinet in February 2020 and to publicly advertise the contract via the competitive tendering process. The cabinet report is published on the council's website and include the link again for ease of reference <https://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/ie/ListDocuments.aspx?cid=302&Mid=6419>

Yours sincerely

Nat Stevens FCIH (*Pronouns: He/Him*)
Resident Involvement Manager, Housing Department

It was asked how we progress and escalate this from here, as they attended our meeting and heard what people had to say, but have chosen to ignore?

The response was that we are proposing to send a further letter to the leader of Southwark Council to bring him up to date with the experience we are facing with the Department of Housing and Nat Stevens and to explore every avenue we have in order to hear us and consider our plea to them.

It was suggested that we need to go to the Cabinet as the Council are simply trying to put out to tender what SGTO are currently doing and are likely to bring someone in who doesn't know what they're doing. Chris advised this is already in discussion as another option.

It was pointed out that at the last group meeting, it was discussed about taking a deputation to Full Council as Cabinet is made up with Labour representatives, whereas going to full council, reaches everyone.

There are no timeframes given or when next Full Council meeting is to be held, so at the moment we are compiling all information ready as we have our funding until September. No tendering template has been made available as yet.

Action: Write further letter to head of Southwark Council informing him of our experiences with the Department of Housing

Action: Discuss deputation to take to Full Council

Actions from January minutes:

A letter was sent on Monday 20/02/2023 to the leader of the council following the council meeting on 11th January.

3. Updates on meeting with the Council on the 7th December

This was due to the group meeting on 07/12/2022 regarding SGTO funding, where we have written to the council repeatedly, a copy of the response has been provided and we have been discussing about further action to take. We will sieve through the recommendations that have been made tonight and build up a game plan to take to full council as previously suggested.

Same action as in item 2.

4. Lack of structure for consultation

Housing & Community Safety committee was mentioned, where they plan their work for the year, but had been asked to include the tenant participation structure and could a review of what has happened so far be made available? They reported that is not their remit, but comes under the Housing, Community, Engagement committee, which has been argued with assistance from Everton Clark, with answers that it basically doesn't matter which committee it comes under, but it does.

Representatives were finally invited to the meeting on Monday 20/02/2023 from Leaseholder Council, TMO and the Tenants Forum to discuss tenants' participation. John McCormack gave a presentation, which had not been consulted with any tenants beforehand, on the way forward for Resident Involvement which offered 5 pages of bullet points, which didn't give any information, the councillors didn't understand and unusual phrases used, such as 'The amnesia we've experienced since lockdown'.

It was very clear that the committee on the panel were all new to the Council and had no idea of previous structures as they didn't know the history of Resident/Tenant Participation. There were 3 very good representatives from TRAs' that had been invited, so it looked good from the council's perspective. However, a woman who attended the meeting had to travel back with 4 children on the bus at 9.30pm, which doesn't give a great definition of Community Engagement.

It was pointed out to them that Community engagement is one section of our TRAs', but the other major part is ensuring that everyone has a decent home to live in. We should be negotiating with the council, but we are not getting any reports, so could not have any effect on policies made. The chair of the meeting was surprised by the extent of these problems and is proposing to hold a further meeting for discussions to be had as this meeting achieved nothing. It is clear that decisions are being made without consultation, where we need to take this forward.

It was expressed that the chair reconvene this meeting as promised and to allow more time for people to make contributions, which would also allow the new councillors to read previous papers to gain some knowledge.

It is believed that under the Housing Act, councils must consult with tenants, which clearly isn't happening, and this could be used against them. The new Cabinet or leader of the Council aren't listening, ward councillors aren't available. We have to regroup to be able to fight for our rights.

Another point raised from the meeting was the findings that TRAs' are not diverse enough. How did they come to this conclusion, who did they consult with, where are the stats, because it is clear from attending meetings and known TRAs' that there is a lot of diversity. This has obviously been done on assumption as the person is new, as had they researched information properly, this conclusion would not be met. Also, to have a scrutiny panel who did not challenge this data provided by someone who's been in position for a couple of months is outrageous. Why didn't they ask, how, where did you come by this information. It needs to be challenged otherwise the council will use this against us.

Chair of the meeting has asked to have a meeting with Chris and Cris to find out the actual problems and history, to then be able to call another meeting with significance that can make some changes. Need to ask that all TRAs' are invited to the new meeting, so everyone is involved.

Reference was made to item 40 in the cabinet paper circulated, where it states; 'The council will continue to support TRAs as the foundation of resident participation. Our ambition is to have a TRA covering every council home. We will develop a joint plan to improve support for TRAs, developed with TRAs, setting out what the council and SGTO will do followed by points that the council never implement or act on. This item will be picked up when we go back to reconvene meeting on resident participation.

Action: Chris and Cris to have meeting with Chair to be able to call further meeting.

5. Any Other Business

Homes 4 All - Day of Action, Rent Freeze update:

Around 50 people gathered outside Department of Levelling Up, quite diverse in terms of number of organisations represented.

London Renters Union have called for a day of action for rent freeze, sometime in March. People are being threatened with eviction, going into rent arrears, situation is going to get worse.

There will be more agitation around this issue and we will see a lot of devastation in lives over coming months.

Anyone who wants to support campaign, can come to Homes4All meetings to get involved.

Empty homes

The council have an empty homes officer to speak to about unoccupied properties that could be used, this covers all properties, not just council

SGTO TRA Support Group

It was raised that there remains to be a councillor in this group which is not acceptable and needs to be resolved as is a violation to have someone who is trying to dismantle SGTO in this forum

Action: Councillor to be removed from group (name not provided at meeting)

Cost of Living, Energy Referral Scheme

The council have advertised the Cost of Living fund through over 80 referral partners, SGTO being one of them. They have information on their website and wrote to all tenants in January 2023 advising of scheme to cover those not on email and those who missed the information.

SGTO has sent out multiple emails, produced posters and criteria sheets on what information is required. SGTO will do referrals in person at office, by email, website or by phone. We sent all the information to our database, for those representatives to pass on information to those they know are now digitally included. It is not SGTO's project, we are a referral partner assisting the council with this scheme. We have gone above and beyond to get this information out and by the amount of referrals SGTO have actually processed. Last time we assisted with this scheme we processed 205, this time we are at 3000, which is a massive increase.

There is a roadshow at Cherry Garden 10-1pm on Thursday 23/02/2023 on the Cost of Living fund.

SGTO staff were commended for the amount of work they have done and doing on this project and the amount of hours being worked when it really is not within their remit to do so and the council need to take heed of this and realise the amount of support being given and look at how this is administered next time around.

Meeting closed: 08:54pm

Date of next meeting: 22nd March 2023

Action: Cris to liaise with Margaret to arrange first Repairs Conference group Meeting.

Action: Write further letter to head of Southwark Council informing of the experiences with Department of Housing

Action: Discuss deputation to take to Full Council

Action: Chris and Cris to have meeting with Chair to be able to call further meeting.

Action: Councillor to be removed from TRA support WhatsApp group (name not provided at meeting)