



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 March 2023 on zoom

Staff: Margaret Onwuta, Amanda Carey

Attendees: 20

Apologies: Al-issa Munu, Carol Vincent, Colin Harrison, Liba Hoskin, Althea Smith, Sam Vacciana, Caroline Platt, Latisha Henry

1. Welcome & Introductions

Dario introduced himself as Vice-Chair of SGTO and advised that he would be chairing the meeting this evening.

2. Minutes of Group Meeting held on 22nd February 2023 and Matters Arising

Agreed as a true record

Proposed by Beverley Graham

Seconded by Damien Cheetham

Matters Arising from 22nd Feb.

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

This was done and sent and awaiting a response

Action: Discuss deputation to take to Full Council

This is to be updated

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

This is yet to be arranged with the Chair of the Community Scrutiny Committee

3. How do residents experience heatwaves - Guest speaker – Paul Eccles from Global Health, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism

Paul works for the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, a not for profit newsroom, which produces community-focussed investigations to expose systemic wrongdoings and hold power to account.

They would like to work with around 40 people and monitor the heat in their homes over 4 to 6 weeks to see how their environment and housing affects their experience and what impact this has on their health. They are speaking to members of the Southwark community and organisations working in the area to identify people who would like to take part. They are also keen to work with residents and organisations alike to make sure that the findings from this investigation can be as

useful as possible in holding landlords, housing associations and government to account for people's living conditions.

As well as publishing the findings from this investigation they will work with communities to equip them with the tools to continue to hold power to account when it comes to heat stress and bad housing. As highlighted by The Committee on Climate Change in their 2021 report, "new housing developments continue to be built without resilience to heat... despite the Committee's consistent advice".

Southwark recorded the second hottest average temperature in the country last year, and they're interested in speaking to people who have found the hot temperatures of previous summers have caused them some trouble or discomfort. This could be generally feeling or becoming unwell or conditions like asthma getting worse, or it could be difficulty getting housing to a comfortable living temperature and not being able to sleep at night.

They are asking each person to take a heat sensor into their homes, which will take regular temperature readings for 4 to 6 weeks. People taking part will also complete a short survey or interview at the start and end of this period. Where possible, they will also try to record how people are finding the heat in their own words. This might include journaling, responding to text messages sent out on particularly hot days, or taking a short phone call to discuss what it feels like. They will aim to make these interactions as light-touch and convenient as possible for anyone taking part. They will be flexible and accommodate any language, literacy or other needs in how we do this. And they're open to ideas! This is the community's investigation to define so if participants or organisations working with us have ideas they would love to hear them.

Once the data is gathered and processed they will publish the findings. The Bureau publishes its investigations in different places depending on the investigation. Recent Bureau stories have been published with ITV News, Channel 4 News, the BBC, The Guardian and The Mirror as well as regional media. They will also work with organisations and residents in Southwark to make sure people from the area are aware of the findings.

Findings from previous Bureau investigations have been used by grassroots community groups, campaigners, trade unions, regulators, politicians, and academics. Our stories and data have contributed to changes in policy and law at local and international level. We don't campaign ourselves - the strength of our journalism comes from its impartiality. But we can help get our findings into the hands of those looking to hold power to account and change their circumstances for themselves.

Floor opened for questions and comments

It was mentioned that with some blocks, you have no control over the heating system, and unable to turn off or down. So, not only are you impacted by the heatwave, you have the extra heat to contend with from the radiators and pipes, which has a detrimental effect on health.

A heat map was mentioned, where you can see how your area is affected during summertime and what temperatures to expect. Paul said that they obtained their data from compiling a multitude of meteorological reports over last year.

Concerns were also raised about the upcoming possibility of further water shortages this year as there has been limited rainfall.

Paul was asked if they had approached Southwark Council to obtain small air-con units to provide to residents. He said that they are conducting the survey on properties to collect data first, as you need to have evidence before you can take action.

If you wish to get involved, please contact Paul Eccles: pauleccles@tbij.com

4. Update on meeting with Head of Southwark Council on Lack of structure for consultation

Unfortunately, no update to be given. A letter was sent to the Leader of The Council requesting a meeting, but no response has been received as yet.

5. Discussion on your Call Centre experiences

The Chair opened the floor for people to speak, as from comments made on the TRA Support WhatsApp Group, it was clear that this needed to be item for discussion and had been requested by a member.

Member mentioned the frustration of the initial attempt at trying to get through. You ring and get an automated message system where you need to select different number options for the reason for your call, and when you make a selection, you get cut-off and have to redial and start all over. When you do actually get to speak with someone you get a scripted response and a promise of a call back from someone who can assist, which never happens. Also, there are language barriers as the accents of some staff can be difficult to understand.

It was suggested that the staff being employed at the call centre in Queens Road, do not have English as their first language and not being given adequate training. An example of this was given where an electrical fault was raised with the call centre and explained that it was not an emergency, but within an hour an electrician arrived having been told that the entire kitchen had gone bang. This highlights that there is a communication issue.

It was mentioned, that in order to get a reference number, you have to say it's an emergency when it isn't, otherwise nothing will happen.

Another example was given, where the contractors didn't turn up for an appointment for a gas inspection. They texted a number to be called, but call didn't get answered. Having worked in the call centre, the member explained that the calls go through an app, where each calls are categorised from emergency to not, and then the system filters the calls deemed important through to be answered. They are then answered by someone with little to no training who are paid a very low salary.

Further example was provided where a leaky roof was trying to be rectified. Three different contractors attended who each said it wasn't their domain, so another call made to the call centre trying to explain this, but with no resolution and still a roof that is leaking in the community centre.

There was mention of a Call Centre Working Party that used to meet monthly at Queens Road, who got involved and would discuss on ways forward for the benefit of the tenants, callers and the Council. It's frustrating that we seem to have gone backwards when something is so straightforward. There is a consultant who is trying to set up a new Repairs Group but there appears to be no notification sent out advising of this. When trying to put name forward for this, have been informed that shortlisted due to the high demand? and a questionnaire sent to completed to be able to put self forward, which only asked for area, age category and sexual orientation, not what experience you have in dealing with repairs.

A further example was given where a leak was affecting a property below. The call centre had been contacted three times where a reference number had not been provided and

everything had to be explained from scratch for each call. The priority telephone number for TRAs' was used and eventually a reference number was given. You shouldn't have to explain yourself multiple times and literally beg for a service and something to be done.

Another comment made, was that it would be great if Southwark could be as proficient in dealing with repairs as they are in dealing with parking tickets. You can be sure that if you park somewhere you don't realise you shouldn't, they are swift in issuing a ticket and chase for payments. If only they treated and processed repairs with the same ethos.

The SGTO are organising a Repairs Conference, and the Repairs Conference Group have met and discussed what we want from the Conference. The key points were, what do we want our repairs to look like, to have the opportunity to explain to the operatives the issues we face and to then find resolutions as to how these problems can be rectified. The conference will have five sessions; Communal Estate Maintenance, Call Centre, Repairs, Heating & Hot Water and Damp & Mould. Tonight's meeting was to gather thoughts and experiences on the call centre as the recurring issue raised on WhatsApp was waiting time on calls, where you could be hanging on for 40-50 minutes at a time.

Please forward your thoughts and experiences to build a catalogue of issues to info@sgto.co.uk

6. Any Other Business

Increase in Service Charges

Residents are experiencing a huge increase in service charges and are finding it difficult to comprehend these new costs which seem to differ from estate to estate.

The council are trying to install meters into individual properties, so that people pay for what they use, but until they update the current systems, you have no control over the usage as with district heating, it is centralised.

If people have to pay for what they use, they will simply sit in the cold as they cannot afford to put the heating on.

Smyth & Byford are attending properties and saying they need to update the heating system and installing these meters, so once they are in, individuals will then be charged independently.

The council are implying that it is now a legal obligation that people can control their own heating, but many will suffer as they simply will not be able to afford to have the heating on if charged independently. It was said that this initial transition was to conduct a survey as to how many people switched off their heating and would not mean they would be charged individually which would be monitored over a two year period.

In an ideal world, district heating is the best option, as you will not be cut off if you cannot afford to pay the bills, but in many areas it does not work as the system has not been maintained and fails to work at the most crucial times, leaving homes without heating or hot water.

The Chair asked if Paul Eccles would be interested in looking into this scenario with regards to heating issues following the new Government guidelines that people should be charged independently for usage, when the current heating systems in place do not allow for people

to regulate their usage. This in turn means that during heatwaves, additional heat is being expelled as no control and therefore generating more heat which is probably why the records show such a high heat source in Southwark as heating is constantly on, whether you want it to be or not.

Paul acknowledged that this would be beneficial and would also assist the upcoming survey they are intending for the summer heatwaves.

There has been recent issues on service and major works, where what would be deemed to be major works has been identified as service charges by the council. An example of this, is where new windows and door entry system installed, but being classified as a service charge and not major works. This causes financial implications as you have a longer time to pay for major works, but with service charges, they have to be cleared within that financial year. There is also a major difference from the estimate to the actual charge, in this case for the door entry system, a variance of £2000, which is a substantial amount and gave a resident a bill of £4000 which needs to be paid in less than 6 months. Why are general services not being completed, ie; paintwork, replace floor tiles, clean lift etc. which is what the service charge is for, instead of hiking the cost up by including a major works item. The residents are seeking legal advice as the council are not forthcoming with an explanation to the charges being made, how they are calculated and if you refuse to pay or appeal, they will hit you with threats that it will affect your credit rating and they have access to your mortgage.

Cris said that she has access to some information, but will need to obtain permission from Ena to circulate. Once advised, this can be circulated to the membership.

Action: Dario to send Paul Eccles detailed notes on unadaptable heating systems in blocks where people cannot regulate heating output.

Action: Cris to get permission from Ena on sharing information. To then, if approved, send to SGTO to circulate with membership.

SGTO moving premises

It was announced that the current Bells Gardens Community Centre is closing in the next 3 weeks, where a temporary community centre has been erected to the side of the existing Building and SGTO will be moving into these new premises whilst the current is demolished and rebuilt, which is estimated to take 2 ½ to 3 years. All services will remain available to the TRAs' that SGTO offer. The current sign will be moved to identify the new premises with additional signage provided for the entrance via the estate.

Meeting closed: 08:35pm

Date of next meeting: 26th April 2023

Actions

Action: Dario to send Paul Eccles detailed notes on unadaptable heating systems in blocks where people cannot regulate heating output.

Action: Cris to get permission from Ena on sharing information. To then, if approved, send to SGTO to circulate with membership.

Previous articles published by **The Bureau of Investigative Journalism**

As some background, here are some investigations we've published in the past year:

- [Thousands of vulnerable people cut off from gas and electricity for days at a time](#) (with The Mirror, December '22)
- [Lack of affordable lets leaving families with little to live on](#) (with Channel 4 Dispatches, October '22)
- [Disabled people trapped waiting for years for vital home adaptations](#) (with Channel 4, April '22)
- [Thurrock council reveals £500m black hole caused by ruinous business deals](#) (November '22)
- [Predatory businesses profit off personal debts](#) (with Channel 4 News, March '23)