



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 26th October 2022, 7:00 – 9:00pm Zoom

Staff: Margaret Onwuta, Amanda Carey, Ahmed Kabba, Liliane Rodrigues de Arruda, Jack Lewis

Attendees: 10

1. Welcome, Introductions and Apologies

Apologies: Sam Vacciana, Kiri Pieri, Coralie Allison, Jennifer Newton, Saidat Oketunde.

Chris Meregini welcomed those present to the meeting and reiterated his thanks for being elected as Chair of SGTO. Chris invited members to introduce themselves to others. June Lewis, Cris Claridge, Althea Smith, Shaun O'Regan, and Jennifer Honnah-Sesay gave introductions.

2. Minutes of Group Meeting held on 27th July and 28th September 2022 and Matters Arising

Minutes of 27th July 2022 Group Meeting:

Agreed as a true record.

Proposed by Cris Claridge.

Seconded by June Lewis.

Matters arising

Chris had tabulated the different themes of attendee questions for Councillor Darren Merrill:

- 4 people raised questions in relation to the bidding process and the housing waiting list.
- 2 people raised questions on the housing crisis.
- 1 person raised a question on downsizing.
- 2 people raised questions on homelessness.



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- 3 questions raised on fire safety and structural design.
- 4 questions raised on repairs.
- 1 question raised on estate cleaning.
- 1 question raised on the Council's resident engagement structure.

June said that downsizing was an issue on her estate. A lot of people wanted to downsize but did not know how. June wanted to give her residents more information on downsizing and on housing allocations in general. June said she had a good relationship with her Resident Officer but when Cris suggested that June go to them for help, June said that the answers this officer had previously provided were not very useful. June said the Officer was better at dealing with matters related to repairs, rather than allocations.

Chris emphasised that repairs is a topic that keeps coming up. Chris stated that we needed a separate conference on repairs to decide on our approach to the issue.

Cris Claridge felt that at the SGTO Tenants Conference, residents did not receive the answers they needed at the Repairs Panel event, and there was a need for a separate repairs conference. Cris proposed that we create a resident working group to get a repairs conference together. One issue at the Tenants Conference was that chief officers responsible for repairs did not attend. We would need to ensure these officers attend any special repairs conference that we organise. Cris emphasised that we would not need to spend thousands of pounds on this – the conference could take place at Bells Gardens Community Centre, free of charge.

Althea agreed with Cris' view. We would need this special conference to get answers.

June offered Brandon 2's hall if Bells Gardens is not available.

Georgie suggested that the special conference consider how TMOs manage repairs as well, to ensure it is an inclusive event.

Tanya said the repairs situation is likely to worsen. The Government recently conducted a consultation into the capping of social rents. Tanya acknowledged that in light of inflation and tenants' incomes not increasing, there should be a rent freeze. Tanya also said that a rent freeze or a below-inflation rent rise would create a hole in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). This would make it difficult for Councils to perform activities such as repairs and also the building of new Council homes. Yet tenants still can't afford a rent increase. Defend Council Housing has been arguing for a rent freeze while also asking that Government makes up the shortfall in Councils' HRAs. Tanya outlined two possible scenarios: a rent rise with increases in arrears and evictions, or a freeze or



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below inflation rise and a decline in Council services. We need to encourage Councils to fight for increasing HRA funding from Government, and also a rent freeze. This would protect both the building of new Council housing, and tenants and residents.

Chris emphasised the need to communicate with the Council to find a common line of action.

Cris Claridge mentioned that this issue would be covered later in the meeting, as the SGTO had submitted a response to the Government asking for a rent freeze.

Dario suggested that we visit the Repairs Call Centre to see the process officers go through. A resident on Dario's estate works for Southwark Council as a call centre worker – they work from home and are not allowed to leave their desk. Dario believes that we could better understand the situation with repairs if we knew more about the working conditions of officers.

Chris said that these are aspects the repairs conference working group could consider when organising the conference. The issues raised at this meeting could feature as agenda items at a repairs conference.

June wanted to see what the compliance process was. Dario agreed that this was something we should look into.

Georgie emphasised the need to take a coordinated approach as TRAs and TMOs, approaching the Council with our concerns. June suggested that multiple letters could be sent outlining the same concerns, to maximise our chances of getting a response.

Chris mentioned that at the Repairs Conference residents would have the opportunity to raise these concerns directly with the most relevant Council officers.

Action: SGTO to retrieve information on downsizing and respond directly to June Lewis.

Action: SGTO to put together a working party focused on organising a repairs conference.

Minutes of 28th September 2022 Annual General Meeting:

Proposed by Dario Blake.

Seconded by Cris Claridge.

No matters arising.



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3. Feedback from LTF Meeting/Social Rent Capping Consultation

This item was moved forward on the agenda to allow this meeting's guest speaker, Eugene Nixon, time to arrive. Jack went on to outline the background to the SGTO's response to the Government's rent capping consultation.

Jack mentioned that in September, Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation reached 10.1% - the highest level since 1982. With this in mind, the Government are considering a new approach to social housing rent increases. Originally, rises were limited to CPI inflation plus 1%. This worked when inflation was less significant (for example: 2% or less). Now the Government are considering limiting rises to either CPI inflation plus 1%, or a ceiling of 5% - whichever is lowest. This was put out to consultation where organisations and individuals could feedback. Jack and Cris Claridge attended a meeting with the London Tenants Federation (LTF) meeting to discuss the consultation. LTF were arguing for a rent freeze. This makes sense as residents are really suffering – the price of food is rising above inflation and energy bills are skyrocketing. Jack created a response advocating for a freeze. This was shared with the membership, and it has now been submitted to the consultation. Jack read out the first two paragraphs of our response:

"Instead of a ceiling, we believe that a rent freeze should be introduced. Social housing residents are amongst the poorest in society and they are already struggling to make ends meet. During this Cost-of-Living Crisis, they simply cannot afford an increase in rent.

We recognise that Registered Providers need to adequately fund essential resident services, such as repairs and maintenance. We know that without a ceiling or rent freeze, Registered Providers would more than likely cover their increasing costs in-part through an increase in rents. We propose that Government increase their funding of Registered Providers to ensure that a quality of service is maintained. Social housing residents did not create the current inflationary pressures on the economy, and they should not have to pay for it through their rents."

Jack mentioned that later on in the response, the issue of arrears and evictions increasing with a rent rise was touched on. SGTO advocated for a two-year rent freeze, and also for Government to increase funding for local authorities to compensate for the loss of revenue from rents. The SGTO is still waiting on a response from the Government – they are likely to respond en masse to those who participated in the consultation. Any changes to the way rents are regulated would likely come into effect in the next financial year.



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Cris proposed that we find out what stance the Council are taking on this issue, so that we can both work together.

Al-issa highlighted that with or without an increase, the service has not improved. Al-issa said that any increase needs to be commensurate with service improvements. Without a service improvement, rents should be frozen. The Council have their statutory obligations as a guide, but over the past years the quality of repairs has decreased.

Action: SGTO consultation response to be recirculated.

Action: SGTO to enquire as to the Council's point of view on social rent controls.

4. Feedback from the last tenant conference/Energy Support Scheme (Guest Speaker Eugene Nixon, Head of Strategy and Compliance, Exchequer, Finance and Governance)

Presentation from Eugene

Eugene introduced himself, saying he was here to talk about how SGTO and SGTO members can help those struggling with the Cost-of-Living Crisis.

The upcoming winter is expected to be difficult for residents in terms of the cost of living. This year, the Council has delivered almost £25 million in financial support. This began with the Energy Support Fund in January, February and March. There were also Council Tax rebates for all properties in the borough banded A to D for Council tax. In the Summer, the Council launched its Cost-of-Living Fund, providing one-off payments of £120 to low-income households, protecting them from inflation. The Council has continued to provide free school meals during the holidays – 15,000 children were eligible for this. The equivalent of £3 per child per day was spent. The Cost-of-Living Fund was agreed in June following local elections in May. Some households received up to £270 if they had missed out on Council Tax rebates earlier in the year. This phase of the Cost-of-Living Fund came to an end in September, but in the Autumn and Winter, the Council are considering targeting support at low-income households not on benefits. This includes pension-age households not claiming benefits they are entitled to, or households just over the income threshold to receive benefits.

Huge increases in energy and basic foodstuff prices are putting pressure on household finances. Some households are more exposed to this than others, particularly those on pre-payment meters. Households outside of the benefits system are much less likely to be known to the Council. It is easier for the Council to provide support to households



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they have more information on. The Council also recognises that Council housing residents are more vulnerable than those on other tenancies – having less income and less secure occupations. Eugene noted that many of those at this meeting were involved in the Resident Working Party looking into the financial impact of COVID-19 on the finances of Council housing residents – this project exposed some of the vulnerabilities of Council tenants in particular. This report identified that residents were more likely to go to those in their immediate community for support, rather than directly to the Council.

Eugene recognised how embedded TRAs already are in their communities, and that they can play a role in connecting vulnerable households to needed support. Eugene also recognises that the SGTO can play a role in supporting TRAs to do this. SGTO already worked to connect residents with support through the Community Referral Pathway last winter. The SGTO was the first partner to sign up to the pathway and the first partner to start making referrals. The SGTO made 200 referrals between January and March 2022 – the vast majority of these receiving support. Eugene highlighted how we could draw from these successes in this winter's scheme.

Eugene was pleased to attend the SGTO Tenants Conference and community meetings in Old Kent Road and Rotherhithe, where Eugene met many residents and heard their views on the Cost-of-Living Crisis. Eugene noted a very clear enthusiasm from residents to support others during the Cost-of-Living Crisis. Eugene heard interesting ideas on how residents could be supported from many residents, including Althea Smith, Henry Mott, Andrew Eke and Nicholas Okwulu. This winter's Referral Pathway is already open and SGTO are already submitting referrals. Community Southwark recently sent out information about the scheme, receiving interest from TRAs including Acorn, Kingswood, Tustin, Brandon 2, Cherry Garden, Alvey, and Bricklayers Arms. Eugene saw the scheme as being "SGTO-coordinated and tenant & resident led." The Council would play a facilitating role, being able to accept up to 10,000 referrals. Those eligible will receive a £100 voucher to help them with energy costs this winter. Eugene was keen to set up a resident steering group to guide and promote the scheme.

Questions and comments

Jack noted that there was huge potential for residents to successfully promote the scheme. Jack cited the example of Caroline Gardens, where the TRA had leafleted the Estate and now SGTO had received over 60 referrals less than a week after they first advertised the scheme. Many of these referrals have come from Caroline Gardens. Jack noted that residents trusted their TRA to help them get onto the scheme, meaning there was a lot of potential for TRAs to successfully support the scheme. Jack



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mentioned that Amanda had emailed members with the eligibility criteria for the scheme. She had also created a form which residents can fill in and send back for the SGTO to process onto the scheme.

Eugene mentioned that at Tenants Conference, residents identified the following groups as being particularly in need of support:

- Low-income households not claiming benefits
- Elderly people
- Single person households
- Lone parents and their children
- People with no recourse to public funds
- Those with mental health issues
- Those living in poorly insulated homes
- Those with disabilities

Eugene remembered how at the conference, residents had in fact identified Caroline Gardens as an estate with people in need of support, particularly considering that the homes there are not very energy efficient, and that the Estate contains many elderly residents. The main focus of the scheme includes people not claiming benefits, with the exception of those in-receipt of disability benefits, who will be receiving support automatically. Eugene spoke of how many residents lacked digital skills, and that TRAs can help get people referred who may otherwise be unable to navigate an online referral form.

Amanda mentioned that members had been emailed on Friday 21st October about the scheme, and SGTO processed 63 referrals in the three working days following this. Amanda spoke of residents being very worried about how they would get through the winter months.

Cris asked that Amanda produce a new version of the scheme poster that isn't black to make it easier to print. Amanda agreed to do this but also noted that you could put the fillable form through people's letterboxes rather than the poster. This form has our number on it and they can call the SGTO to make their referral. The poster Amanda originally designed was not designed to be printed many times because of the amount of ink this would take.

Dario asked what provision has been made for those speaking English as a second language. Dario recognised that if the support is just provided for English speakers those who don't speak English will not be able to access it.



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Eugene said that last year, some materials were published in Spanish. Eugene said that local knowledge and support would be crucial as residents themselves would not be filling in the forms for the Community Referral Pathway.

Georgie agreed with Dario's point and added that some people may be less in touch with TRAs, not to mention that some TRAs are struggling. Georgie would like to see the Council do more work to reach out to those speaking little English. Georgie asked whether residents would need to fill in the form themselves or have someone complete it on their behalf. Georgie mentioned that she is currently organising a coffee morning and wanted to know if she would need to collect information from residents there, or pass information on so that residents could complete the forms themselves.

Eugene outlined three routes for residents wanting to access the Cost-of-Living Fund. One route is the Community Referral Pathway. Here, a TRA could make a referral on behalf of the resident. TRAs are not the only partners to complete this process. 75 partner organisations have signed up already, including organisations catering to Southwark's Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority communities. Schools will be an important partner too. They are coming on board in the next few weeks. There are around 100 primary and secondary schools in Southwark.

Eugene went on to outline the other two routes. In one, the Council themselves will identify the vulnerable household. Households on disability benefits will automatically be given support. Another route is people referring themselves directly – the Council have not yet designed the form for this. The resident steering group could have some involvement in this. Eugene mentioned that when this form is designed, it should be available in various languages.

Amanda mentioned that the SGTO had also been receiving some applications from carers on behalf of others who would struggle to relate their information online or over the phone.

Eugene said the SGTO clearly had a coordinating role and wanted to make sure that SGTO members were involved in the resident steering group. The Group would have to consider questions including the accessibility of the scheme and the effectiveness of promotions. The Council will be able to facilitate but residents will be in the driving seat. Eugene cannot yet confirm that the support will continue beyond April 2023, as it is dependant on Government funding. If the Government extend their grant, the Community Referral Pathway would likely continue.



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Ahmed outlined that the SGTO is completing forms over the phone on behalf of residents, and agreed with Jack that many referrals had come from Caroline Gardens. Children and carers sometimes call on behalf of those needing support.

June thanked Eugene for coming and said that she would definitely need to promote the scheme to residents on her estate.

Ahmed said that currently we had had more interest from the South of the borough, but encouraged people to reach out to the North of the borough. Chris said that the SGTO needs to promote the scheme directly to TRAs in the North of the borough. Amanda emphasised that the SGTO mailing list includes TRAs in the North of the borough, and mentioned that Cherry Gardens TRA in Rotherhithe had already agreed to promote the scheme to their residents. Eugene mentioned that at this stage, Cherry Garden and other TRAs will complete referrals via SGTO.

Amanda mentioned that there is time to promote the scheme and get more referrals in. Eugene said that the coldest months will most likely receive the highest quantity of referrals. Between now and late November/early December would be a time to really promote the scheme in preparation for the winter.

Ahmed expressed some doubt as to how it would work if TRAs themselves did the referrals. Ahmed encouraged TRAs to be in contact with the SGTO, who would do the referral. Chris said that the SGTO would act as an umbrella for TRAs trying to promote the scheme and signpost people to make sure they could be involved.

Melissa introduced herself as Chair of Brunswick Park TRA. Melissa mentioned that as her estate does not have a noticeboard and contains many street properties, they were struggling to identify Council residents to promote the scheme to. Melissa asked if people like Sonia Forrest (Council Housing Officer) would receive information on the scheme and promote it.

Eugene mentioned that Resident Services would have their own role in promoting the scheme. The Council will be in touch with the Resident Services Team and connect them to what TRAs are doing to promote the scheme.

Melissa mentioned that recently, the TRA had leafletted 600 homes to promote their AGM. Melissa asked whether she could come to SGTO to collect leaflets to use to promote the scheme.

Eugene thanked the SGTO for inviting him to the meeting.



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Action: SGTO and Eugene to establish a resident steering group and promote this group to the membership.

Action: SGTO to produce an alternative version of their poster for the scheme that isn't black, for ease of printing.

Action: Eugene to provide SGTO with a list of TRA contacts who have expressed interest in the scheme.

5. Any Other Business

Jack mentioned that he had completed a 26-mile walk from Tower Bridge to Hampton Court Palace on Saturday 15th October, to raise money for the SGTO's Winter Warmer packs containing thermal mugs, hats and gloves. This was part of the Walk The Thames fundraiser event, organised by the London Legal Support Trust. The SGTO had raised £211 so far but the fundraising link is still open for donations. Jack said that any donation would be appreciated however small. Jack mentioned that Steve Lancashire from Southwark Law Centre had done some of the walk with him before stopping part way due to back issues, yet Steve continued the following day to complete the whole walk.

Action: Fundraising link to be shared with members so they can donate to our fundraiser.

List of actions

Action: SGTO to retrieve information on downsizing and respond directly to June Lewis.

Action: SGTO to put together a working party focused on organising a repairs conference.

Action: SGTO consultation response to be recirculated.

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