



# 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 24<sup>th</sup> January 2024 - zoom**

**Staff:** Margaret Onwuta, Amanda Carey, Ahmed Kabba, Joe Snazell-Holding, Ygerne Price-Davies

**Attendees:** 24

### **1. Welcome, Introductions & Apologies**

The Chair, Chris welcomed everyone to the meeting and into a New Year. No apologies had been received.

### **2. Minutes of Group Meeting held on 22<sup>nd</sup> November and Matters Arising**

Minutes were agreed as a true record.

Proposed by Cris Claridge

Seconded by Kyle Simmons

Chris announced that all actions had been completed, apart from Althea to share contact details for James Brockway and a list of local SNT Sergeants.

No Matters arising.

**Action:** Althea to send James Brockway and SNT Sergeants list to Margaret for distribution.

### **3. Meet & Greet with Shah Alom & Nat Stevens**

Nat Stevens introduced Shah Alom as the new Tenant & Homeowner Involvement Team Leader, whose responsibility is to ensure that voices of residents and partnership organisations, such as SGTO, are accounted for when designing and delivering landlord services.

With regards to SGTO funding, Nat announced that they are working profusely on a design for specifications that meet the needs and aspirations of all residents:

1. The growth, development and support of TRAs'
2. The empowerment of residents to be able to hold the Council accountable for landlord Services:
  - Repairs – where there is a Repairs Improvement Board
  - Support for a Building Safety Residents Board, which is paramount.
3. Make sure environment improvement works has a minimum impact on residents.

4. Ensure TRAs' are well managed, governed and committee functions are working well, and disputes are resolved
5. Financial governance, in terms of funding provided, is audited and managed in line with the Council to ensure the interest and views of the residents is firmly protected.

Nat said they are very positive and confident in the future working partnership with SGTO and with Shah onboard to ensure we are working collaboratively in supporting the tenant's movement. He acknowledged that we will not always agree on everything, but we need to ensure the money taken from our rent payers and given to SGTO or another Contractor is used wisely and value for money services are delivered.

Shah introduced himself and said that he has 10 years' experience working in housing, where 8 of those have been specialising in Resident Involvement. He is looking forward to his new journey with Southwark and working in partnership with us all.

#### Opened for questions

**Q.** Are SGTO going to be funded now, as the statement that SGTO will be working in partnership with the Council, would suggest that, so the contract is no longer going out to tender?

**A.** We have always worked in partnership, the funding for SGTO has been extended until September 2024. The cabinet paper in 2020 requested to get a set of Performance Indicators because of the amount that is funded to SGTO. This has to be a tendering process with a Partnership Framework Contract with the services and expectations required.

- SGTO as a partner, to support the Council in increasing the number of TRAs'.
- The successful partner to support TRAs' in ensuring there is attendance at local forums, and they are supported and that the voice of residents is firmly embedded in the design and delivery of landlord services.
- Partners are able to support the Cost-of-Living project.

The procurement contract process is going through and once the performance indicators have been submitted and approved, invites will then be circulated for people to tender for the contract.

**Q.** For residents who wish to be part of the various boards, procurement etc. what is the process and timescale from showing an expression of interest, to being accepted/rejected and if on each board, how much of their time would be expected.

**A.** The council have an online panel of 650 volunteer residents, eg. for the Repairs Board, an invitation was put to this group, an independent consultant compiled a list of those who submitted an expression of interest, contacted them and those residents are now part of that board. Because of the Grenfell tragedy, there is a need for a Building Safety Board, and the recruitment process is happening now.

If anyone wants to get involved, contact Shah who will send you the details.

[shah.alom@southwark.gov.uk](mailto:shah.alom@southwark.gov.uk)

**Q.** How can you ensure independence if we are under your tender, as could not go against anything Council proposes for fear the purse strings being cut and contract terminated.

Lawyers will be creating this contract, where we will need to employ the same to check that there are no clauses that give the Council ultimate powers, otherwise we will simply be working for the Council with no independence, which is extremely important.

**A.** The contract will have certain responsibilities and obligations along with the performance indicators.

Eg; The tender states you are to grow and develop 5 TRAs' across the borough, audit 50 accounts, attend meetings and support TRAs' every year. These are contractual requirements and need to be identified in reports on how you have met these demands and fulfil these obligations.

SGTO is already doing these, but because of the amount of money involved, it is no longer a grant as it exceeds the threshold, so it must go through a procurement process.

**Q.** The procurement process is being presented in a way that is making SGTO very vulnerable and an option to be considered would be for sole supplier, so only SGTO need apply, as only SGTO can meet these tender requirements.

Also, is there tenant involvement on the contract board putting together the specifications and if so, who are they? If there is any partnership working, it needs to have been expressed everywhere across the tenant's movement.

Finally, has there been an equality impact assessment under the public sector equality policy within that considered class, as this would provide a strong case for a sole supplier.

**A.** A single supplier contract was considered, but because of the amount currently being granted to SGTO, it exceeded the threshold.

Over 600 residents were surveyed on what they want this service to look like and they all indicated the issues which have already been given as examples, more empowerment, more routes to be able to hold council accountable, contractor to be able to work with them, to grow TRAs' and ensure TRAs' have power and to have more overview and scrutiny over the landlord services, especially repairs, complaints, ground maintenance, estate cleaning and building safety.

The surveyed residents also want to be part of the housing allocation service, as there is limited stock available, and they want to have an input as to the allocation policy and how its designed as to who gets a property and why.

The Repairs Residents Board set the Performance Indicators and scrutinise the level of service being provided.

In terms of class, every project provided by the council must demonstrate how they are narrowing the gap by making sure that your voices are heard in how the council designs and delivers services.

**Q.** It was brought into question that the Council have not succeeded in carrying out any of the points raised. With regards to empowering TRAs', stakeholders and good governance, how can this be achieved when emails aren't even answered, disputes not settled, and the offer of mediation isn't expanded on. To speak with such words when the reality is totally different is questionable.

**A.** The matters are very technical and are being dealt with by the appropriate authorities meticulously. The emails are being dealt with; responses have been given by a superior level. There is a complaints process in the Council, and it is being worked through the stages.

It was pointed out that responses have not been received or any explanation provided as to the progress. This was corroborated by another member, who said there is a lack of communication from the Council when dealing with complaints. The Chair said that Nat can, outside of this meeting, check the validation that responses have been sent and if not, advise TRA of current situation and progression.

**Q.** In terms of the tendering process, it must have been a cabinet decision, so the cabinet paper should be made available with the level of funding included.

**A.** The cabinet paper has been shared and is available for all to see on the Councils website, along with the equality impact assessment.

**Comments.** A member stated that they have no idea what the role and functions of the Resident Involvement Team are anymore and when an attempt to join the Repairs Resident Board, was advised it would take some time due to mass interest, but later heard that the applications were so small so everyone who applied was put on the panel. It was cited that 600 residents were surveyed, where there is over 36,000 residents, so a true reflection can not be observed from such a small group. Also, ordinary people cannot spend time trying to search the Councils website for information or to join various panels, this should be circulated. The tenant's fund was set up to become an independent voice so we could monitor what the Council are doing, to work with the Council when relevant, but not to be better partners with the Council.

The tendering process that we are putting in for is to work in partnership and carry out roles, that was believed to be Resident Involvement Team's responsibility, so it would not allow us to be an independent organisation representing the voice of the people. A system that was working and had the potential to be a good platform was decimated and now we must prove ourselves in the next 6 months and to work in partnership with the Council, where what we need and want to be is the voice of the tenants and be an advisory body to the Council to highlight where things aren't working.

The Chair raised his disappointment and spoke of a meeting in December 2022 with the Council and Cllr. Darren Merrill where the discussion was around the funding and that SGTO is funded through the levy which was set up by the tenants to fund SGTO as an independent organisation to support them and act as their voice. The Council are now trying to disorganise SGTO so that we can no longer campaign against the Council on issues that are not good for residents. We can work in partnership with the Council but as an independent organisation with the funding from the levy. If we go out to tender, who are we going to be competing with. Based on our understanding from our previous meeting of December 2022 with the Council on this same issue of SGTO funding, we should be moving forward to the next stage, but instead it feels like we are going backwards. It was agreed that SGTO would be funded by the levy, but now the Council are saying different, so this previously agreed statement, needs to be revisited.

A member highlighted that Nat and his team are following guidelines from the cabinet, so we need to hold the Councillors to account for making these decisions.

It was suggested that the minutes from the 2022 meeting be scrutinised, and points raised listed along with responses received from the Council at the time on what they committed to and sent to the Council for clarification as everything agreed is not being adhered to.

There is an outstanding meeting with the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Housing that needs to be chased up and insisted that the meeting takes place as everything discussed with them is different to what we are told tonight.

The tenant fund is incorporated into the Housing Revenue Account, but not ringfenced, which is being highlighted here and questions need to be asked and answered.

The Chair thanked Nat and Shah for attending and hoped that the meeting has given them an idea of how the tenants are feeling.

#### **4. "Model TRA Constitution and De - Recognition of TRA's - request for support from Bermondsey Street Residents Association"**

Richard Lee appealed to SGTO for assistance for a long-standing TRA that is being threatened with closure jointly by the Council and Leathermarket Management Agents (JMB). The model constitution is the device being used in the attempt to close the TRA.

The principles and experience of the tenant's movement is that to be independent, there must be some way for the TRAs' to decide their own rules within reasonable guidelines and to be accountable, but to have an independent voice.

They are currently a functioning TRA, with officers, a constitution, a committee of 8+ people, and meet regularly. This however would not seem to be enough for the Council or JMB as they will not accept their model constitution. Even though they are under a TMO, they remain independent as a TRA and apply for our annual grant, along with other funding opportunities alongside all other TRAs'.

Three years ago, the Council agreed to the TMO (JMB) taking over the tenant participation responsibility, which means that they no longer apply directly to the Council for their tenant's levy money, rather they must go through the JMB. Since then, they have been under pressure from the JMB to ditch their constitution and adopt one that the JMB designed.

The JMB wrote to every tenant on the 4 covering estates stating that a public meeting would be held to set up a new tenant's structure and an invitation to join them, unless Bermondsey Street TRA accepts the JMB's constitution. Until this is adopted none of them would be able to access and benefit from the tenant participation fund. and no access to a community room to hold meetings, no access to any funds from the tenant's levy, no representation in decision making structures etc.

The question is whether this is correct and if all the TRAs' have now accepted the Council's sample constitution or do some still hold their own independence. If so, would SGTO be able to communicate the importance of independence and individuality to the Council and JMB and ask that some slight adjustments to be made to be unique for each TRA. Also, it would be helpful to have a document which indicates the differences in the rights when you are under a TMO, other than a TRA and that there are basic rights that all should be able to benefit from regardless, without this division.

The Chair stated that having run a TMO previously, there are differences in the constitution and style of management from TRAs', but the Council are still the landlord.

It was suggested that BSRA need to get hold of the JMB constitution and find out the levy awarded for the TMO, whether they are still holding their AGM's and if residents are being invited, as they have a right to vote whether to remain as a TMO or not.

Richard confirmed that JMB do hold AGMs' and at the last in October 2023, BSRA and Decima requested to put a motion on the agenda stating that there must be a process followed on deciding the constitutions of the TRAs' and that they cannot be imposed upon, as the independence and equality must be recognised for each. The board of the JMB refused to allow this for discussion as they had already made a decision and ruled out the proposed motion. It was pointed out that the JMB must contact tenants every year to ask the question, are you happy with the management structure and are you happy for us to continue with our services and give residents the option to vote them out if necessary.

Richard appreciated the advice offered but said that it is very difficult to operate in an environment where you are not allowed to speak and denied access to meetings. To make matters worse JMB have the full backing of Southwark Council that is meant to be the impartial overseer. This is because JMB has a development company and the rent etc. from new homes is paid to the development company and not to the tenant's fund. People do not realise that they are not council tenants, as they are not properly informed.

The Chair said that SGTO must be providing services to the benefit of all tenants across the entire borough and that we don't have the capacity or legal standing to go against the Council or JMB.

It was pointed out that the model constitution was circulated by the Council around 2016. It's a model, therefore does not have to be followed word for word but sets out the basic policies and conditions which have to be followed and allow each TRA to adapt to their requirements but would be adopted by all TRAs'.

With every TMO, there must be an independent TRA as a monitor, otherwise there is no one monitoring what the TMO is doing, the same way as TRAs' look at what the Council is doing. The suggestion was that SGTO could pull TMOs' together to discuss the issues, as there may be others who are suffering the same and need a platform to be able to discuss. It was pointed out that TMOs' are the issue and that the problems lie with the TRAs' who are managed by TMOs' not having any standing. Many areas who set up a TMO, disbanded TRAs' as they didn't feel it necessary to have both.

The chair said that if the other TRAs' under JMB are of the same opinion, the SGTO can speak with the TRAs' to form an opinion to take to either the Council or JMB.

An example was offered, where at just before the start of a pre-organised meeting, the committee was advised there would be a guest speaker, but identity kept quiet. It turned out



to be someone coming to introduce a new constitution on the day, this meant that the document had not been shared with the members the usual 14 days in advance, so no option to read it through. It was agreed at the meeting to take the document away to have the opportunity to read properly and speak with Louis Rotsos from the Council for advice. Louis confirmed that it is a model and can be adapted to the needs of the TRA. The model constitution was used as a base document and compared against the existing that was already in use, and a new produced. This was taken to the committee of the TRA at a general meeting where it was explained how this draft was reached and what amendments had been made. One adjustment was the age at which members can vote, it was suggested 18 to be in-line with the tenancy agreements with the Council, as someone at 16 can occupy a property but their tenancy held in trust by an organisation until they are 18. Following a lot of textbook consultation with the committee, the new constitution and the old were circulated ahead of a special general meeting where it was then adopted. This was then sent to the Council for approval, but later the JMB said they wanted their model constitution, which was different to that provided by the Council, and despite that BSRA had ensured the draft created covered good governance, length of time someone can hold position, 2 people from same household cannot hold officer roles etc.

Offer of assistance was given by Peter Davis, if Richard chooses to accept.

D'Eynesford TRA have an excellent, functioning TRA and are actively part of their TMO at board level and would be willing to share experiences if contacted.

Due to time, the agenda item had to stop, but the Chair invited the TRA to make an appointment with the SGTO to discuss further and try to find a resolution and people to signpost to.

## **5. Invitation for Meet & Greet Hakeem Osinaike - New Director of Housing**

**Action:** The position does not start until March and due to time constraints, will now be discussed at February group meeting

## **6. Any Other Business - (Community Fridge)**

SGTO has been awarded funding for a Community Fridge where we are to contact local business who have surplus foods and they can donate to us for distribution in the community. We are currently trying to source donors and preferably from businesses who have regular spare food stuffs that can be offered on a weekly/fortnightly basis. All items must have a sell by date or eggs stamped.

Suggestions for the Felix Project and Fare Share were given, also the local Pantries and Foodbanks.

There is also Free Carbon Literacy training which is on 7<sup>th</sup> February at Bells Gardens Community Centre 10am to 5pm.

The training will be facilitated by Dr Susie Arnott, a climate expert who will explain climate change and how it affects you and your environment.

Invite Director of Communications to a future meeting

It was requested that a special thanks be given to 'Shallom' for coordinating the collective response on the last-minute consultation on Rent & Service Charge increases.

Meeting Closed 21:15pm

**DATE OF NEXT GROUP MEETING: 28<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 2024**

### **ACTIONS**

2. November Minutes

**Action:** Althea to send James Brockway and SNT Sergeants list to Margaret for distribution.

5, Meet and Greet with new Director of Housing – Hakeem Osinaike

**Action:** The position does not start until March and due to time constraints, will now be discussed at February group meeting