

Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations

Newsletter

February /March 2007

TENANTS AREN'T DIM, KIM!

On 1st February, Southwark Council announced '100 days of change' in housing. But tenants representatives first heard of the new structure in a letter from Executive Member Councillor Kim Humphreys on October 30th. So what happened to the FIRST 100 days and the changes promised then? On 29th November, Kim told SGTO's Annual Meeting we'd notice early improvements to housing services within 100 days - with no mention of a February start! Quietly the Council leadership has started the timer again hoping no-one would notice. But we did...

On pages 2 & 3, we report on events ahead of the SGTO Group meeting on 28th February. We look at where different housing services have gone and hear from tenants trying to hold politicians to account for pushing the changes through - without the meaningful consultation we've had for most of the last two decades.

New Committee gets stuck in

SGTO held its 2006 Annual General Meeting on 29th November at Bells Gardens during which the participants elected a new executive committee, to help administer SGTO, coordinate projects and encourage more tenants and residents of Southwark to participate in housing issues. Nineteen executive members have now joined us! They represent a broad range of T&RAs from Southwark borough and their different backgrounds and experiences promise to be a great asset for the organisation and its future activities in 2007.



Executive Members from the right to the left (induction meeting on January 2007): Frank Tamplin (Mardyke House), Cris Claridge (Buchan), John McGrath (Sceaux Gardens), Al-Issa Munu (Associate), Josiah Lahai (Tabard Gardens Central), Andrew Eke (Tustin), Peter Davis (Tabard Gardens North), Roger Prince (Wyndham & Comber), Lionel Wright (Tabard Gardens Central), Dia Scott-Emuakpor (Lordship Lane), Ola Adeluola (ASCO).

The other executive members are as follows:

John Jones (Cossall), Kim Jones (Castlemead), Marilyn Jones (Cossall), Melvin Kanu (BACC 84), Hannah McDonald (Penrose), Abayomi Noble (Comus House), Ian Ritchie (Buchan), Allen Russell (D'Eynsford).

200 DAYS OF CHANGE LAUNCHED... 20 YEARS OF CONSULTATION DUMPED?

Soon after Southwark Council's controversial overhaul of its Housing Department, SGTO invited to its Annual General Meeting last November Councillor Kim Humphreys (Executive member for Housing) and Gill Davies (now Strategic Director of Environment and Housing). Questions raised included the closure of Southwark Housing, accountability, transparency in decision-making, privatisation, and the effectiveness of the Call Centre.

Both Cllr Humphreys and Gill Davies agreed tenants were receiving an unacceptable level of service. The key points were that a "cultural change" is needed with a new leadership. Cllr. Humphreys promised effective change within 100 days, a system of agreed appointment times for repairs, better contract management so that contractors will not be paid if they're not performing, and more staff on the ground on estates rather than in offices. The Call Centre would see significant improvements or face very serious questions.

CONSULTATION? WOT CONSULTATION?

After the housing changes had been made it was too late for tenant and resident input to change anything. The Council suddenly held a "consultation " exercise which, it claimed, showed "no overwhelming opposition" to the reorganization.

But when Gill Davies, Strategic Director of what's now Environment and housing, did a tour of Area Housing Forums in December 2006, no paper on the changes was presented to the tenant representatives. This meant no recommendations came back from the 12 Forum meetings. Meanwhile, on 27th November the Chief Executive had published a paper called "Consulting on Strategic Management Arrangements Within Southwark Council". Her office says this was posted to all Tenants and Residents Associations, yet several T&RAs say they didn't receive copies. SGTO would like to know whether T&RAs received this paper - please contact the SGTO office on 020 7639 6718 and let us know.

In January 2007, a SGTO deputation went to key Council bodies Overview & Scrutiny and the Executive. They asked questions on why and how the future of housing could be decided without reference to tenants & residents, who have a clear legal right to consultation.

For SGTO Chair Cris Claridge, "The response from the Members was a resounding show of indifference and an arrogance that they know what is good for us. The most interesting part of the whole evening was to see the Councillors' embarrassment at having to backtrack because the legal advice originally given to them was incorrect." [that Chief Officer title & functions can only be altered by Council Assembly.]

For SGTO Executive member Frank Tamplin, "Both times we were well received. However, I'm not sure that on either occasion, we were actually heard! Let's hope that they listened and heard what we had to say!"

We understand that the housing changes were approved at Council Assembly on the 24th January 2007 with no debate allowed.

Where housing services have gone

Housing Management, Leaseholder Services and
Housing Investment TO Environmental Services
Housing Revenues and Benefits TO Customer
and Corporate Services
Housing Revenue Account and Housing General
Fund TO Director of Finance
Housing Strategy and Regeneration TO
Regeneration (includes tenant involvement and

consultation processes and investment in
support of Decent Homes)
Community Housing Services TO Health and
Community Services (includes supporting
people, access to housing)

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200 DAYS OF CHANGE LAUNCHED... 20 YEARS OF CONSULTATION DUMPED?

Our concern is the lack of consultation. Tenants have been identifying problems for years and if we had been involved in the improvement programme from the start, we might welcome these changes.

Tenants haven't been receiving the service we expect, and we shouldn't be made to pay for a failing service. This was the view of Tenant Council which on 22nd January voted down a 5% rent increase. There should be financial penalties on the contractors and proper compensation to tenants. The Call Centre has destroyed the relationship between housing staff and tenants and the 2005 Tenants Conference voted for the Call Centre to be taken in-house. What we need is a full independent customer audit of the repairs service.

Are the improvements viable given the constraints in which the housing service is operating? The reality is that sufficient housing finance isn't available, leading the Council to reduce its repair obligations. Meanwhile money is being moved from housing into other Council services like regeneration & environment. Receipts from the Right to Buy and the land sales aren't being used to improve housing services, but going into the general fund. Tenants are scared that with the changes there will be more 'regeneration' of council estates, and a greater loss of council housing.

Tenants don't criticise for its own sake. We're prepared to work with Cllr Kim Humphreys and Gill Davies as set out in the Tenant Compact and the Tenant Vision. Cllr Humphreys and Gill Davies should have a meeting with SGTO, Tenant Council and Leaseholder Council to agree a process for improving the housing service. Tenants are feeling bombarded with official publicity and substantial reports and need information that is speaking for tenants. With its permanent staff team starting to take shape, SGTO is in a position to produce tenant reports alongside council reports and to be involved as a co-designer of improvements to the housing service..

For Unison Secretary **John Mulrenan**, "Kim Humphreys appears to be calling 100 days of change without any consultation with staff, tenants and leaseholders. It would appear the Council is still failing to commit to any consultation whatsoever. If Cllr Humphreys pushes ahead with moving staff and changing their job descriptions, we will ballot for strike action."

Tenants are also taking action. A new campaign, Save Our Consultation Rights (SOCOR), has been formed by tenants who believe the Council has breached tenants' right to consultation under the Housing Acts. They're hoping to have the issue considered by the High Court and are appealing for donations to help fund the case. For more information, contact Lionel Wright on 0207 403 1697 or email lionelwright@homechoice.co.uk

New Elected Officers

Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations (SGTO) is an independent voluntary organisation representing and promoting the needs and rights of tenants and residents associations (T&RAs). SGTO has representation on car parking and tenants halls working groups, Tenant Council, Southwark Alliance and London Tenants Federation.



John McGrath (left), Chair of Sceaux Gardens was elected SGTO Vice-Chair. John has lived in Southwark for the last 25 years and describes himself as someone who has always been a spokesperson, whether for Trade Unions or local organisations. "SGTO" he told us "is an umbrella for the rest of the T&RAs in the borough and I want to make sure that we continue to go out, attend meetings and fully represent the T&RAs, and let them know that we exist and that our role is to support them. I enjoy what I am doing and I want SGTO to work in the best interests of the tenants and residents of Southwark."

Peter Davis (right), Chair of Tabard Gardens North T&RA, has been re-elected Secretary of SGTO. Peter wants to ensure that SGTO keeps playing a central role in defending the rights of tenants and residents in Southwark. "Whenever a problem arises we can organise meetings with councillors and send delegations to the Council to express residents concerns. We've recently been involved with other groups in the campaign against the dismantling and privatisation of the council maintenance and repair services. This is a crucial victory and we need to make sure that we continue strongly supporting tenants and residents rights."

Cris Claridge (pictured in the middle), a founding member of Buchan T&RA, is the newly elected SGTO Chair. Cris has a wealth of experience in council housing matters, ranging from a decade working in SGTO (from 1982 to 92), to 8 years (from 1992 to 2000) as a Southwark ward councillor. "I've always considered that one of the most important issues is that people have access to decent homes and I have always been fighting for that right." When she became a councillor (first as a Labour candidate and then as an independent), Cris dedicated most of her time on housing issues: "I was Vice-Chair of housing for three years and then Chair of Housing for one year. I became an independent councillor after voting against the rent increase in 1997. I strongly believe in council housing and I am very excited about the work achieved by SGTO and want to help develop its activities in the future."

Regeneration at what cost?

In recent years Southwark council tenants have experienced major restructuring of their housing services. One of the most controversial schemes has been the closure of local housing offices and their replacement by call centre services. Although Southwark Council cite an efficiency drive many tenants feel that closures have led to a deterioration of public services, especially for vulnerable groups. At the Elephant and Castle, embattled council tenants are now facing a further loss of local services, due to Southwark Council's plan to build housing association accommodation and private housing on land set aside for council estates. These developments are being driven by the

In December 2006, Peter Davis, Chair of Tabard Gardens North T&RA, was informed by letter that the housing sub office at 169 Long Lane was earmarked for closure. The reception and cash office at 169 Long Lane provides a crucial local service to tenants of the Tabard Gardens estate, but the Council is planning to close it to the public at the end of March 2007.



Entrance to diversity garden, Library Street

In the letter the Council's Housing Operations Manager for the Borough and Bankside area, Ms Ghazala Faizi, wrote, "Housing management services for all Borough & Bankside tenants and leaseholders will continue to be provided at 1 Library Street, SE1 ORG."

expanding Regeneration Department, now in a much stronger position now that it is responsible for managing some of the housing services.



Area Housing Office, Library Street

However, local residents have every right to question the Council's plans. Firstly, the proposal to close Long Lane was made without any formal consultation with the local community, including the tenants and residents associations, probably because as Peter says, "the Council previously tried to close it six months ago, but the tenants and leaseholders mobilised and the Council had to temporarily back down and abandon the closure project." The closure will have a serious impact especially on the old, physically impaired, the poor and those with family commitments without private transport.

Secondly, the proposed alternative of the Housing Office in Library Street has an uncertain future itself. An article on the London SE1 Community website dated the 8th January reveals that "four architects have been appointed for the final phase of new housing for residents of the Heygate Estate - including new homes in Library Street." This implies that the local housing office as well as the Bankside Open Spaces Trust's Diversity Garden and the four existing prefabricated homes could be demolished in the following months or year.

Regeneration at what cost?

We contacted Helen Firminger from Open Spaces who explained to SGTO that a campaign was set up to stop the Garden being demolished: "we have got the assurance from key Councillors that most of the garden will be preserved. Our current concern is now about the future of the prefabricated homes that are going to be demolished. Two elderly ladies live here and to this date they still don't know where they will be relocated."

These developments are part of the Elephant and Castle's regeneration planned by Southwark Council. According to the *Housing Development Programme* the Library Street site should be demolished in Autumn 2007. It is worth reminding ourselves that the Government's planning inspector who examined Southwark's

However some confusion over the future plans of the Council still lingers. Guy Valentine-Neale, Area Manager told SGTO that: "the housing office in Library Street will not be demolished within 12 or even 18 months and a new housing office will be rebuilt on the site." In the meantime Zoe Simone from the Elephant and Castle regeneration team assured SGTO that "the dates for the start of the construction haven't been decided" and "that nothing was set in stone. A consultation with the local community" she added "will take place on Thursday 1st March and people will be able to discuss matters with the architects and the housing associations. The time and venue of the meeting are not confirmed yet."



new Unitary Development Plan (UDP) warned that Library Street should be exempted from the list of sites earmarked to be demolished. His recommendation was rejected by the Council.



According to Peter Davis, the Council's actions are part of a broader project: "We used to be able to go to our local offices and have human contact with housing staff. Now the Council is centralising everything and gradually forcing everyone to go through the call centres. People are not comfortable with it because it can be hard to get through, you cannot speak directly with a housing officer and often there is no follow up on a call. The Council has granted the American company Pearsons a contract worth £100 million for a service that doesn't work."

Library Street is one of fifteen sites earmarked for housing development within the Elephant and Castle regeneration. Very few tenants and residents seem to know about this, despite the tenant consultation structures. For Al-Issa Munu, who objected to the demolition of all 15 sites at the recent UDP inquiry: "these spaces are of high value to the local community for the services they provide (such as tenants garages, social services and housing offices), for their play facilities and for their appearance and quietness as an open space. The regeneration should not happen at the expense of the existing residential communities."

Regeneration at what cost?



Jessie Snelgrove, 80 years old, is one of the persons facing eviction from the prefabricated Council houses at Library Street. Jessie who was born down the road in The Cut, has been living here since 1978. "These bungalows were built in 1963" she told us "and should have been destroyed after three years." Forty four years later the bungalows are still standing, and two of which have become the home of two elderly ladies. "I wish the Council could leave me alone" Jessie told SGTO, "I have spent all my life in Southwark and I have been living here for 29 years. I don't want to move anywhere

else. The Council spent money last year on the roof, and now there is nothing wrong with the property."

Jessie is suffering from Paget's Disease, a rare condition affecting her bones, and which prevents her at times from walking. She still hasn't been informed where she will be relocated to but remains determined: "if the Council is not going to destroy the Garden then I am myself not going anywhere. I'll be attending the consultation meeting on the 1st March to tell them how I feel."



ensure that changes do not inadvertently or unintentionally discriminate against a particular group.

Three T&RAs on the Tabard estate are involved - Tabard Gardens Central, Tabard Gardens North and Tabard Gardens South.

SGTO calls for tenants and leaseholders to attend the consultation meeting for Library Street on 1st March.

SGTO also calls for a full equality impact assessment of the proposals for both Library Street and Long Lane, which will try and

Are you affected by the closure of Long Lane or Library Street offices? If you have any comments on this article, write to SGTO and we will publish. For further information on the 15 sites contact the SGTO office.

Useful information

Join us at the Group meetings

SGTO is organizing monthly Group meetings which are opened to all council tenants in the borough on the following Wednesdays: 28th February 2007, 28th March 2007, and 25th April 2007 at 7 pm at Bells Gardens Community

Centre. Only elected delegates are entitled to vote but tenant & resident observers are welcome to attend. The main theme of the Group meetings is providing an opportunity for debate and ensuring council tenants can input? What changes would YOU like to see?

Fisher Amateur Boxing Club in Bermondsey Estate



Fisher Amateur Boxing Club
 Tower Units, Unit 2, Rally Road
 Bermondsey, SE1 2EZ
 Contact: Steve Hiser
 Tel. 02083113846



Bermondsey Estate is home to Fisher Amateur Boxing Club which is celebrating its centenary anniversary in 2007. The club is easily accessible opening to dozens of local boys and girls, as well as adults who can train cheaply any day of the week. Priding itself on its close ties to the community, Steve Hiser, Fisher's boxing head coach explains, "It's like a big family with the youths that I

trained twenty years ago now bringing their kids to the club. I myself joined the club in 1957 to box, before becoming the coach." Its strong roots have helped Fisher unearth local talent producing many champions and in doing so winning Fisher national recognition in boxing circles. So any new prospects? "Last December one of our kids, Obed Mbwakanga, who has trained

here for the last seven years, won the NBA title. He is only 17 and many see him as the new Amir Khan", enthuses Steve. Despite Fisher's successes the current concern for Steve and the club is the premises. For some months the club has been located at Rally Road but Southwark Council could



soon ask them to pay an annual rent of £25,000. "We would never be in a position to pay this money. The kids love it here and we ourselves installed all the security. We are providing an important

service to the community by helping the kids learn discipline and respect for others. Most of the people at the club work as volunteers so we would be really grateful to the Council, if it

could let us use the premises for free." This would be knockout not only for the Fisher Amateur Boxing Club now in its 100th year but also for the youths of Bermondsey Estate.

