



Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations

Bells Gardens Community Centre,
19 Buller Close, London,

Campaigning for Housing Rights and Council Homes

SE15 6UJ

Minutes of SGTO Group Meeting Held on Wednesday 26th May 2021 , by Online ZOOM

Present: 22 attendees.

Staff: Margaret Onwuta, Amanda Carey [Minute Taker], Ahmed Kabba, Silvia Rahim and Rhiannon Hughes

Welcome and Introductions:

The group were informed of the sad passing of Ian Ritchie, a speech from Cris was read, the section where tributes were offered at Council Assembly was played, , people voiced they're emotions and a minute's silence was observed.

1. Housing Allocation Consultation Response

It was advised that this is the first time since 2013, that the council have consulted on the policy and put out a number of questions for people to respond to. The following document was then read out:

We want homes to go to local people.

What happens now?

You can't be on the register unless you have a "connection" to Southwark. You have a connection if you have lived in Southwark for 5 years or worked in Southwark for at least 9 of the last 12 months, or have close relatives here.

What we are proposing.

1. You will only have a connection if you have lived in Southwark for the last five consecutive years. Working local connection criteria will only apply to key workers who, through their work, are completing a community contribution. Do you agree with the change?

Yes No Not sure

Do you have any comments on the change?

Local connection should not only be applicable to the narrow definition Southwark Council is using as key workers. Why is the council seeking to change the current policy?

Increase priority for victims of domestic abuse

We want to increase priority for Domestic Abuse households from band 3 to band 2

What happens now?

Accepted homeless households as a result of domestic abuse are placed in band 3 and on average remain in temporary accommodation for approximately 3-5 years

What changes are we proposing?

2. We will increase the priority banding to band 2, to enable domestic abuse households the ability to achieve a move within a shorter period. Do you agree with this question?

Yes No Not sure

Do you have any comments on the change?

It is positive that those fleeing abuse will have an increased priority. Anyone who is at risk in their existing property should be placed in Priority Band 1 and they should be considered under the Band 1 proposed policy "tenants who require an emergency move". Domestic abuse put households at extreme immediate danger and they should be considered under Band 1.

Southwark Council should improve the temporary accommodation it uses so vulnerable people are able to stay there safely. People placed in Band 2 accommodation will still be expected to stay in temporary accommodation for a period of time.

We want to ensure households in a housing need can still join our housing register.

What happens now?

Existing council tenants with no housing need can benefit from the 'Good tenant' award placing households in band 2 whom have paid their rent on time and have no associated antisocial behavioural issues. Additionally some households who are working or volunteering will get additional priority within a band through our starring system.

Due to the additional economic pressures facing households as a result of the pandemic, we recognise there will be a number of residents whom are not in employment and have had difficulty in maintaining a clear rent account.

What we are proposing to change

3. We aim to remove the community contribution 'Good tenant' band 2 award. We also aim to simplify the starring system, applying the voluntary contribution star for residents volunteering for the local tenants and residents association. All other stars will be removed.

Do you agree with the change?

Yes No Unsure

Do you have any comments on the change?

There are currently 26 households who have been awarded the 'Good tenant' star out of the 15,000+ on the council's waiting list. For some households this is the only chance they have in moving out of their severely damp and unsuitable properties as they can not secure a more suitable property through a home swapping platform.

Tenants have fought to get these stars accredited to the housing applications.

Tenants who have contacted SGTO and have a 'Good Tenant Star' ask that there is a pause period in removing this as they have been unable to bid for social housing for most of 2020

due to the covid-19 pandemic and rely on their star to enable them to move to more decent housing.

All housing stock should maintained so damp and unsuitable housing conditions in properties is not driving people to move.

We want to build stronger local communities in line with our new build developments

What happens now?

New build council homes are subject to a 50% allocation to the local community. The homes will be allocated once the development is completed.

What are we proposing to change?

4. We aim to tailor each local letting scheme to meet the needs of each individual housing development, including partner housing associations. Therefore, we will remove the restriction of 50% maximum for council and other social housing properties, and increase the percentage of local letting offers, where possible up to 100% of new build schemes. This will also include pre allocation 10 weeks after construction starts to enable residents the ability to have an input into their new homes. Do you agree with this change?

Yes No Unsure

Do you have any comments on the change?

Estates are already being told that up to 100% of the allocations will go to local residents within the estate. SGTO submitted a New Homes Matrix for Southwark Council to use during its consultation with estates during new homes project consultations so estates could have an understanding of housing need within the estate.

If 100% of need is within the estate this should be allocated to existing tenants to keep communities together.

There should be better use of 3 way house swaps so if a property is overcrowded on an estate, another property under-occupying on the ground floor and a household needing to move to ground floor they can be matched. This will help manage the need on the housing register rather than having to limit it.

Properties that are being developed must be developed for the needs of existing tenants. If there is someone on the estate needing to move to a adapted property and there are new homes being built there should be an adapted property included in the new homes for the tenant in need.

We want residents to feel comfortable with their engagement with the Homesearch bidding scheme.

What happens now?

Households engaging in the bidding system are permitted to refuse only three offers of suitable accommodation. Upon the refusal of the third offer, their application will be demoted to band 4 for 12 months.

What are we proposing to change?

5. We aim to remove penalties for residents refusing accommodation with the exception of homeless households residing in temporary accommodation. Do you agree with the change?

Yes No Not sure

Do you have any comments on the change?

People should not be penalised for refusing unsuitable accommodation. Often people in Temporary Accommodation are the most vulnerably housed and may be fleeing violence or needing to live somewhere near hospitals due to poor health. Household experiencing homelessness should have equal housing rights to tenants.

We want to help members of the armed forces

What happens now?

People who are being evicted from housing provided by the armed forces because their partner has died in service currently go into band 2

What are we proposing to change?

6. These people will now go into band 1. Members of the armed forces with a serious illness or injury already go into band 1. Do you agree with the change?

Yes No Not sure

Do you have any comments on the change?

We want to help homeless people

What happens now?

Homeless people go into band 3 but need expensive and hard to find temporary accommodation until they are housed through the register. People may live in temporary accommodation for years in expensive and sometimes inappropriate temporary accommodation that does not lead to the customer having choice of the re-housing options open to others.

What are we proposing to change?

7. We will offer homeless people the chance to rent privately with support and assistance, rather than live in temporary accommodation. In return we will put them in band 2, rather than band 3, which should mean they are housed through the register more quickly. Do you agree with the change?

Yes No Not sure

Do you have any comments on the change?

There is lack of clarity on what this policy will be. Will people lose a local connection or jeopardise their duty to be housed. Before people are asked to support this policy there needs to be clear guidance and protection for people experiencing homelessness and what they are entitled to.

We want to ensure that homes go to those in housing need

What happens now?

We currently advertise properties through our Homesearch bidding scheme in which residents are able to bid for properties that meet their needs. i.e. bedroom entitlement, adaptations and older persons dwellings.

What are we proposing to change?

8. We aim to produce an Annual Lettings Plan; this will set annual targets for property types across all priority needs bands, and ensure applicants in the highest priority needs groups are re-housed as soon as possible through active support from the council. This lettings plan will also highlight the reason for the households being accommodated, the percentage of lettings to each property type and the number of properties used as temporary accommodation. Do you agree with the change?

Yes No Not sure

Do you have any comments on the change?

The council is unable to do this for people currently on the housing register and as frontline services see regularly tenants vulnerability is wrongly assessed by third parties such as Now Medical. This also leads to people not being able to access the homes they are entitled to such as ground floor properties. In order for any local lettings plan implementation the council should clarify this plan and have a specific consultation on their Local Lettings Policy.

The council should also consult on alternative methods of assessment of medical need as the third party that is currently contracted to deliver this fails to identify need. As it currently stands Southwark Council will not have capacity to deliver this plan and make sure that the 11,000 new homes that are being built are the type of home that tenants need eg: number of adapted homes, number of family homes. In light of this a proposed plan should be published and consulted on.

We want to prioritise nominations for Adult/Children's services nominations – care leavers, foster carers and adoptions needing a larger home

What happens now?

At present care leavers are awarded band 2 but can only bid for bedsits. Other social services nominations are placed in band 2.

What are we proposing to change?

9. We are proposing to maintain the priority banding position, awarding band 2 to households whom have been nominated by social services. However we will remove the restriction for care leavers to bid for bedsit properties only. Do you agree with the change?

Yes No Not sure

Do you have any comments on the change?

The new proposal indicates that single people can only apply for a bedsit or studio unless a medical or welfare need. Will care leavers be granted an automatic need to give them above a bedsit or studio flat to over ride your single person policy?

We want to provide the correct level of priority for households residing in overcrowded conditions.

What happens now?

We have 2 levels of priority for households residing in overcrowded conditions.

- Band 1 priority is awarded to households residing in overcrowded conditions as defined by the law.
- Band 3 households residing accommodation one bedroom short of their bedroom entitlement.

What are we proposing to change?

We are proposing to maintain two levels of overcrowding however we wish to have the following criteria:

- Band 1 – Southwark council, housing association and private tenants who are overcrowded as defined by law and lack 2 or more bedrooms.
- Band 3 - Tenants who are overcrowded but do not meet the band 1 criteria.

10. Do you agree with the change?

Yes No Not sure

Do you have any comments on the change?

It is predicted this will effect around 1000 households who are overcrowded.

People are forced into overcrowded council accommodation as access to council properties are depleting. There are currently over 800 empty council homes. There are also homes that were previously demolished and land sold to housing associations that remain empty.

Southwark Council should stop demolitions of properties and insist that empty social housing properties are filled. Southwark Council should also stop the auctioning off of larger Southwark Council owned homes on the private market.

Any situation where teenage children of opposite sexes share a bedroom is unacceptable.

Any situation where children have to share a bedroom with their parents is unacceptable.

Any situation where children have to share a bedroom with their parents is unacceptable.

Adult children are unable to leave their family home because of the cost of renting in the private sector / the impossibility of affording to buy.

Council housing should be homes for life for families. They are not temporary housing

Some further question on overcrowding

We also wish to understand if you would like to have further levels of priority for residents based on the level of overcrowding. Therefore can you please answer the following questions:

11. A) Do you think we should only award households emergency housing band 1 priority for households who lack 3 or more rooms in their accommodation?

Yes No Not sure

B) Do you think we should award Band 2 to households who lack 2 rooms in their accommodation?

Yes No Not sure

C) Do you think we should add band 3 to household whom lack 1 bedroom in their current accommodation?

Yes No Not sure

D) Do you think adult children (over 21) should not be included in the overcrowded calculation for higher levels of priority where there is no medical requirement (receiving or providing caring), to reside as part of the household?

Yes No Not sure

Do you have any comments on the proposed change?

Banding should be based on the number of rooms but on circumstances. Over 21s should be considered on the application because the bidding process which can in some cases take 14 years may have started since they were younger and at 21 they don't stand a chance of getting any accommodation under band 4 as a single person with no medical need.

For SGTO to add in from points raised by attendees:

Succession – where people have had to downsize or to move to homes more suitable for their medical need their tenancy rights should be transferred from previous tenancy to protect them and their households succession rights

Southwark Council should consider providing protection from these changes to those currently in their allocated bands if the changes will lead to a worsening of their housing situations and a reassessment would result in a lesser priority banding, then they should be able to remain in their current band, if a reassessment results a higher priority banding, then they should be able to move into the higher band.

Southwark council should offer a grace period and implementation should not be until March 2022 so that families and individuals who are currently in their bands will not have these reassessed until next year

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March 2022. This will provide a grace period of at least 6 months following the effective date of any new allocation policy would be reasonable.

Reasons for point 1:

A) Last year bidding was suspended for at least 6 months and during this time Southwark were offering property via direct offers. Those on the waiting list had no opportunity to bid and when the bidding was unsuspended there were very few properties available.

B) The proposed housing allocation policy has been considered for those coming onto the housing list but not for those currently on the list which suggests Southwark council no longer consider those on the waiting list a priority.

2. Southwark Council should consider suspending the proposed policy and formulate a policy in partnership with Southwark residents, tenant associations etc. This could be done once the restrictions have been lifted with an implementation date of 1st January 2022. The policy should ensure those currently on the waiting list are not worse off as a result of any policy change.

Reasons for point 2:

A) The proposed policy is being rushed through, a delay and a new collaborative plan is a better approach to resolve the housing crisis Southwark face.

B) Involvement is key to buy in from those who are affected, the proposed policy changes have been taken more from a corporative perspective rather than a community perspective, there needs to be a balance - This is a standard highlighted in a report published by Local Government Association, report called 'Engaging and empowering tenants in council-owned housing'

Is our landlord willing to look into the eyes of our children and tell them they are no longer a priority? are they willing to tell them they are no longer entitled to a room as a priority?

Further questions to be put to the council:

Q: Why is temporary accommodation rent charged at a higher rate than secured tenancies, as this is putting people into rent arrears due to the high costs?

Q: The council have not consulted with every tenant in the Borough, despite this being a major policy that every household should be made aware of. By not consulting with all, they are not abiding by their statutory obligations and why is the consultation only being done online?

Q: Why are people demoted in their band for housing if they refuse 3 properties, as the actual property and layout may be unsuitable when physically seen against the description that has been provided by the council?

Q: How can a child not be part of the tenancy of a home they have grown up in when they become 18yrs old, how can they then get a property?

Q: How can people be penalised for rent arrears that is not their fault?

Chris said that with all the points being raised documented, we can confront them with the errors being made due to the process they have chosen to carry out this consultation.

Rhiannon added that with HASL and Southwark Law Centre, a discussion has been had with a barrister's chamber to determine whether it will be lawful to make the changes as it hasn't been done properly.

The last time the council made changes, existing people on the housing waiting list received letters to advise that their band had changed and had been downgraded, so it is presumed that this will happen again, which will have devastating effects on many.

The deadline is 1st June, so a further meeting is being held with the Law Centre to discuss points raised from both our perspective and theirs on a legal side before this date so we can propose our consultation response where the outcome will be fed back to our members.

2. Survey On Services Provided by SGTO

The council have been conducting a survey on what services TRA's want the SGTO to provide.

We need people to make their contributions and complete the survey on the services they need for the council to take these considerations on issuing a contract for the SGTO to commence in October.

The survey was circulated by SGTO to reach everyone on our database, and the Council also sent it their own contacts. It is very important that those who utilise our services give responses as they know what we do and not those who don't even know who we are. It was advised that TRA's need to be specific in their responses to what services we do which is of assistance to them: from Outreach Workers attending meetings, providing information, mediation, to the Free account verification service which can save a TRA up to £500, to the printing service we provide, to the computer training and any other service we do or don't do, which could be beneficial in aiding TRA's and to help them reach their wider community.

The responses provided will assist the SGTO and CAB to justify their existence and to be able to continue functioning to serve the community for years to come.

It was noted that many people do not have access to the internet and therefore, have not been aware of such survey and therefore, no responses have been provided from this proportion of people. It is important that those who have it skills speak with those members in order to record as many contributions as possible.

One member stated that she is not computer literate, but has aided neighbours in connecting to zoom etc. to the best of her ability.

Contributions received from attendees:

1. Lobby not just the Council, but Local Government as well, as in previous times, when the budget was set by HRA, we would lobby direct to Housing Minister to have grant increased

2. It was suggested that SGTO being the frontline organisation to distribute grant funds to TRA's, being the main hub and aware of their needs.
3. Having provisions to expand the Youth forum was also proposed, in order to attract to engage with more younger people.
4. We need to ask for the consultation to be extended, as the original closing date was 11th May, but people need more time in order to provide their feedback and contributions as they were not aware of the survey.
5. It was felt that putting the contract out to tender, was not the best way forward as the funds would not be spent effectively and another organisation may not carry out the services that are currently being provided.

Any further thoughts or recommendations can be directed to the SGTO office.

Any Other Business:

A member announced that the Area Housing Forum Meetings that the Council are holding are not sticking to the agenda that has been set by the tenants and choosing what they wish to discuss. The whole registration process required in order to gain access is making participating difficult and should be made open to all. This was proven by the last attended, where only 8 residents were present with 23 Council officers. This was challenged at the meeting where it was not representative of tenants and felt that the meeting was just for them and not the tenants it is for and an uncomfortable environment to be in. This is not helping the Tenant Movement and needs to be addressed so the tenants get to discuss what needs they have and not just issues Council feel need to be talked about.

One of the agenda items constantly being removed is the street blocking which are having a huge effect on people's lives, especially those with mobility issues. It was noted that this is not a housing issue and therefore, for it to be discussed, you need to arrange for the Cabinet member who controls roads/transport to attend your meeting as it has impacted on your daily travel and wellbeing.

It was suggested by the Chair, that SGTO can invite the Cabinet member to attend our group meeting to have this discussion as it is a subject that is affecting the welfare on the tenants across the borough.

Meeting Closed: 9pm

Date of next meeting: 23.06.21