



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 the 28/04/21

ONLINE MEETING

Present: 67 attendees.

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

Apologies:

1. Welcome and Introductions

CC welcomed the group and Cllr Cryan and Cllr Williams.

2. **Conversation between Southwark Residents and Cllr Kieron Williams, Leader of the Council & Cllr Stephanie Cryan, Cabinet Member for Housing.**

CC opened the conversation and said that she had never been in this situation before. She hoped the letter that was sent to the Leader of the Council on the 1st of March highlighted that this is 'crunch' time and that any trust 'we' had has been spoiled by Cllr Pollak's actions.

CC invited Cllr Williams to give an overview of where the Labour group stands on this situation. Cllr Williams offered his apologies. He said that he expects a high standard from all Councillors; Cllr Pollak's actions did not meet these standards and his resignation from Cabinet was accepted.

Cllr Williams went on to say that he appreciates the actions of anyone who spends their time working to improve their estates. There will be times when one part of the community thinks one thing and the other part thinks another, the council may be taking a view on one side – but this should always be done in a respectful way, weighing up all the points of view and reaching a considered conclusion.

The monitoring officer is still investigating Cllr Leo Pollak's actions and a report will be issued once completed.

LS from the Priory Court Campaign highlighted that Cllr Pollak had said at the Council Assembly that he will reach out to the Priory Court Campaign; this has not happened. LS would like to know what Cllrs think the standards are that Cllr Pollak did not live up to.

Cllr Williams expects his Labour group Cllrs to be treating the community with respect. To be honest with the community with what they agree about, what they disagree about and having a debate about that. In this case that did not happen. There was not a transparent debate and therefore people involved were not treated with respect.

LS feels that Cllr Pollak actively undermined the democratic process within the borough.

Cllr Williams said that he had accepted Cllr Pollak's resignation from cabinet as he felt it was not acceptable for him to continue in the cabinet office. Cllr Williams went on to explain that those who know Cllr Pollak will know that he is passionate about trying to improve the lives of those in the borough and passionate about council housing. In this case, he got it very wrong. And he should be given the opportunity to demonstrate that he has learnt from this.

IN states it may be easy to class this instance as a 'one off'. The relationship with the council is so damaged and three years ago this was accelerated through the Kiezan Report. Rather than redeeming this relationship the rift was widened through that process of engagement. IN went on to say that It could be seen that what Cllr Pollak did was because he felt entitled, and this entitlement has been felt throughout several processes. What is Cllr Williams going to do to mend the relationship with residents?

Cllr Williams responded that he does not always feel the council get it right; however, there are positives. To illustrate this, he cited recent relationships with Ledbury Estate and the Tustin Estate where the council has really listened and have reached agreed proposals. Cllr Williams has challenged his Cabinet, Councillors and Council Officers to arrive at the point where they are 'always doing the best' Cllr Williams emphasised that he wants to work with us to achieve this.

LH asked why Cllr Pollak didn't resign as a councillor and why he was rewarded financially to step down. She said that it is difficult to accept that Cllr Williams and Cllr Cryan were not aware of the account as they had the housing portfolio previously. LH asked, why when communities get organised are they crushed?

TM from Defend Council Housing stated that Cllr William is using a passive voice but what happened was a campaign to troll community campaigners arguing against unacceptable development on their estates. She gave examples going back to 2017 where Cllr Pollack had used the Twitter account to undermine the work that residents were doing to defend and protect their estates, whilst having immense power over people's lives and he had used that power. Councillors and the council have used that power to say that people live in overcrowded conditions and don't have anywhere to live because tenants living on council estates don't want building on their green spaces. Labour have been in power for decades and have not accepted responsibility.

Cllr Williams said that he would not tolerate any accusations that it was anyone living in Southwark's council estates responsibility or fault that there is a housing crisis. What he wants is for residents and



Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations

Bells Gardens Community Centre,
19 Buller Close, London,

Campaigning for Housing Rights and Council Homes

SE15 6UJ

the council collectively to address the housing crisis. This means building new council homes; but as a council they must win the support and consent of residents as to where these are built.

Cllr Williams explained that there is a need to build some of the housing on land the council already owns as land is so expensive in Southwark. But, they should only build on land where they can get the community support to do that. The council will have conversations about all sorts of sites across the borough and some of them will be nonstarters as the community think it is the wrong thing to do.

Responding to the question as to who was involved in the twitter account, Cllr Williams insisted that he had no knowledge of Cllr Pollak's involvement in the twitter account and the members of the cabinet have stated they also had no idea about the account. Cllr Williams further insisted that it would not be tolerated if it was known, and the Labour group has been warned it is not acceptable.

Cllr Williams explained that the role of the monitoring officer's report is due process.

Cllr Williams said that he has heard the point made that LS has not received contact from Cllr Pollak and he will raise this with him.

SO (Ashley Cooper Estate) asked how can the council work with us? Ashley Cooper TRA feels there needs to be some planning for the youth and listening to residents.

CC explained there is a need for a specific discussion about these important questions which we can address at a future Group meeting.

JB (Brandon 2) You need to stop and review stock before building more. Southwark are heading for a Croydon situation; you need to address these issues as the stock is rotten with damp and mould.

Action: next Group meeting we could invite Cllr Williams to discuss existing housing stock

TL (Brandon 1) asked Cllr Williams to take note of the fact that for the last fifteen months we have not had proper constituted tenant or homeowner forums.

Cllr Williams said that he is happy to discuss the other questions not relevant to this Group agenda at another time. He went on to say that he hears that we want the council to have engagement where we feel respected and that the council is working with us and for us. Cllr Williams said that he wants to work with us so that our discussions can focus on how we can build much needed homes.

Cllr Williams closed by saying that he is deeply sorry for what has happened. The way social media was used by Cllr Pollak was not acceptable and he has been clear this is not acceptable to his Group.

CC said that she felt that Cllr Williams has missed the point. It is more about how we have been treated over the past three years. Personally, CC is surprised that Cllr Pollak has been replaced by Cllr Cryan

who was the cabinet member who first instigated engagement changes. Over a year of lockdown, the support from the council is minimal and any structures we had to communicate have been shut down. The work the tenants' movement has done together with the support from the SGTO has made it the strongest it has ever been. Tenant groups feel bitter and there is a long way to go to build trust. Cllr Williams and Cllr Cryan need to go back to the grass roots as do the whole Council under his leadership. Cllr Pollak should not have been given Cabinet responsibilities if he believed that his activities would be acceptable to the people he claims to represent.

Cllr Williams said that he felt that a lot has been done together over the past year. Repairs staff were out delivering food alongside TRA volunteers. Also we have worked together on New Homes where we have made real decisions on estates based on the visions of residents; we need to achieve more of these things driven by residents. Cllr Cryan thanked the SGTO for the invite.

At this point-Cllr Cryan and Cllr Williams left the meeting-

CC thanked everyone for taking part in the conversation and understood that thirty minutes was not a long enough time to examine all the concerns felt by Group members.

She explained that at this stage she would have to leave the meeting and handed the chair over to Vice-Chair CM.

CM introduced himself and the guest speakers; Izzy from Housing Action Lambeth and Southwark (HASL) and Julia from Southwark Law Centre.

RH was invited to lead this discussion.

3. **Housing Allocations Policy**

Guest speakers: Izzy Köksal from Housing Action Lambeth and Southwark (HASL) and Julia Osmond from Southwark Law Centre (SLC)

RH explained that the consultation for housing allocations was launched in February 2021.

SGTO have been working with SLC, HASL and Cambridge House Law Centre to ask that the council pause, amend, and extend the consultation. This consultation is happening at a time when bidding was suspended for most of last year, TRAs can't meet to discuss, tenant forums are not properly constituted, and front-line services are not available to help people on the housing register.

Izzy Köksal (IK) from HASL highlighted the importance of the housing allocation policy. Campaigners have achieved a month's extension to the consultation. The people most effected are homeless families, those overcrowded and those with a medical need to move.

HASL, SLC and SGTO have spent the last 3 months trying to improve this process and understand the new rules. The new rules are complex and Southwark residents deserve better than this, they deserve a positive future for council housing. The new rules will force more overcrowding, people into the private rented sector, and will give the council more control over the allocation of social housing. HASL



Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations

Bells Gardens Community Centre,
19 Buller Close, London,

Campaigning for Housing Rights and Council Homes

SE15 6UJ

feel that the new rules should be fair and according to need; those with the highest need should be at the top of the list and those with no need at the bottom.

IK gave an overview of the existing policy.

Current policy is **Band 1**: emergency band, **Band 2**: urgent need to move, **Band 3**: medium need to move, **Band 4**: No housing need.

Within each band there are star systems, and these put your position in order within the band. It is then determined by the amount of time you have been on the list. This currently determines your position on the waiting list. The council can also use direct offers.

An issue is the number of properties that are available. One week there may be one, three bed property available and if you are in Band 3, you may be 300th on the list. On a good week, there may be ten, three bed properties so the bidding will be shared out. Over the past two years there has been a massive reduction in the number of properties available and it has got harder and harder for people in Band 3 to bid for them

The proposed new rules will see a massive change and will negatively impact those on Band 2 and Band 3. While Band 1 will still be reserved for those in emergency situations, in Band 2 there will be a change. If you are a homeless family and take private housing, (which can be anywhere in the country), and you surrender your homeless duty you will be rewarded by being placed in Band 2. This will mean you will not be in an emergency band anymore, as there will be so many people in this band with a need to move. This will affect the waiting time of those with medical needs, needing to move urgently.

IK highlighted that having a system where band 1 & 2 are for emergency need is beneficial.

Another change is the removal of priority stars unless you contribute to your estate. The council can still use direct offers.

There will also be an annual letting plan with targets for some of the properties in the bands. This proposal is unclear, what will these targets be? Who will be selected? The council hasn't explained what this plan is, but are asking residents to vote in support of it.

IK highlighted a positive change is that anyone experiencing domestic violence will get Band 2 as you will be classed as having an additional need.

Changes to Band 1 for statutory overcrowding: The existing policy has a term "deliberate act" telling people they caused their overcrowding deliberately; this has been removed. This term had been challenged by people and lawyers, so it is good to see it gone. Although this term is removed, the new

policy proposed is that you now must be statutory overcrowded; this has an extremely high threshold and it means that you must be in need of two additional bedrooms.

IK explained that if you are a household experiencing homelessness and give up homeless duty you will be rewarded with Band 2. Lambeth have a similar scheme, but this resulted in families taking private housing in a different borough, to then being told "you no longer live in Lambeth", so can be removed from the list as you have no local connection. In Lambeth families lost their place on the register, homeless duty and faced eviction again by a private landlord. We are unclear how the scheme will be in Southwark. Offering people Band 2 for taking private accommodation facilitates queue jumping. This will also place more people into Band 2, so will reduce the urgency of the Band. From IK's experience in Lambeth this is not a positive policy and will no longer assess housing based on need.

The Annual Lettings Plan is a major change which is also unknown. There will be quotas and properties will be allocated to people, but we do not know how people will be selected for it. This gives more power to local authorities in decision making. IK uses this to demonstrate why needs based banding should be retained.

Local Letting Policy relates to new build council properties; new build council properties will prioritise local social housing tenants. HASL thinks everyone should be able to access new homes. This removes more homes from the Home Search and lots of people are in extreme housing need.

IK draws attention to the proposals that will change local connection for workers in the borough and it will be just for Key Workers – the definition of key worker is narrow. What about all the other workers in the borough who no longer have a local connection?

IK highlighted what size property you may be eligible for under the new housing policy. If you have a child under 5 years you can only bid for a one bed property which will cause overcrowding. If you are a single adult, you can only bid for a studio flat or a bed sit.

IK explained that if your children are over 18, or other adults that are part of your household are over 18, they can't be on your housing register account. There is a huge need for 3,4,5-bedroom properties and rather than solving the housing crisis with larger properties the local authority is reducing the amount of people that can be housed as part of your household. This policy is unclear to IK.

The priority star system will no longer exist, people have put a lot of time and effort into the star system and want to keep them. The HASL position is that the star system should be kept.

HASL have created an online form as a template response to the consultation and HASL invites members to use the template form if they support HASL demands.

PM, spoke about her situation. She lives in overcrowded accommodation and waited thirteen years to be rehoused. Pascal feels nothing has changed and feels that essentially it is a group of councillors and housing officers discussing these policies amongst themselves and not living the reality of the situation. PM is back in an overcrowded housing situation. PM went on to say that individual people's needs can vary from one person to another. Pascal has a medical condition which was assessed anonymously by



Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations

Bells Gardens Community Centre,
19 Buller Close, London,

Campaigning for Housing Rights and Council Homes

SE15 6UJ

an outsourced firm who made the judgement that she did not have medical need. Her children are unable to move in their bedrooms and the family were told they can live in their open plan kitchen.

TL raised concerns about the removal of the Homeowner Council, Tenant Council and the introduction of the online panel. Information is shared with the online panel in a very leading way. The previous resident engagement structures saw very dedicated people who read all documents to review policies. The new engagement structure gives more power to an online forum where background information is not shared.

RH responded to PM's point about medical assessments being outsourced by the council. SGTO have seen an example where a person had been assessed as having no medical priority to move, even though the tenant is wheelchair bound and there are steps in their accommodation. This outsourced company under the new policy will review medical circumstances of those on the waiting list every 6 months to a year.

Another change highlighted by RH is the removal of the 'Good Tenant Award' given to applicants with no rent arrears or anti-social behaviour activity for more than 5 years, which gave people an automatic band 2. There are only 26 tenants that have the award despite there being more who are eligible.

Julia Osmond (JO) from Southwark Law Centre highlighted that the draft policy is an eighty eight page document. Really the problem in Southwark is the lack of affordable, decent, council *or other* housing. She acknowledged that it is not all the councils doing. Government policy over years has restricted the amount of housing there is to go around. This policy is trying to balance competing needs. The council's intention is to get people off the list by changing thresholds in priority bands. Many of the 14,000 people on the list will never get housing.

JO talked about people's concerns about who will be housed as part of their household. The new policy makes it sound a lot more discretionary and that the decision will be determined by an assessment officer. SLC are seeking clarity on this.

The fact that households with children aged under 5 years will only be able to bid for a one bed causes concern. JO mentioned a previous policy where families with children under one year could only bid for one bed properties and this caused a lot of distress.

The policy seems to build in a lot more discretion to the council over assessments and use of direct offers. The law says local authorities must have an allocation policy which makes it clear what criteria is used for people to be assessed. It is also essential that some priority be given to people who are overcrowded, with medical need and/or people experiencing homelessness.

JO talked about the consultation questionnaire which misses out some of the most pertinent points. She explained that the HASL template goes beyond the council's consultation questionnaire. JO

emphasised that It is important that people respond to the questionnaire. RH said that people can raise questions with her to share with SLC and HASL.

TM looked at the HASL template and felt that some council tenants may have different views to those included in the template. TM thinks the council suggesting 50% of new homes should be offered to existing tenants on estates is to get support from those tenants to turn their estates into building sites. She observed that even with this policy, the council is not getting this support from their tenants. TM referenced Benchley Gardens and Priory Court campaigns where residents fought the development on their estates which included private developments with some council housing included. TM stated that infilling doesn't work, and it has been invented to tackle a crisis that the council created themselves by destroying council homes. TM agreed that the allocation policy should be driven by housing need. There are enough empty homes in the borough to house the people in temporary accommodation; some of these homes are Housing Association homes. A new housing policy is needed that drives homes not housing for profit and uses existing homes for people, not profit.

NF (Southampton Way TRA) stated there is a graph in the consultation document which demonstrates a reduction in the properties that are available to let. People will never have a chance of being rehoused. NF feels this policy will move people off the waiting list. NF struggled with the detail in the consultation. The crucial issue is the lack of supply and he asked why there are no changes in planning policy where private developments are still being granted with little or no social housing. Why are Southwark Council not looking to change their planning policy?

CM thanked everyone for coming to this important discussion and urged participants to forward their views and comments to SGTO on this issue to generate a response to the council.

IK reminded everyone that the consultation closes on the 1st of June 2021. It is believed that the Council is intending to launch the new policy in the Autumn.

RH will compile all comments raised to draft a consultation response.

4. **AOB:**

TF asked when the SGTO website will be updated to use?

CM said it should be available by July.

Meeting Closed: 9pm

Date of next meeting: 26.05.21