

The London Borough of Southwark is unique. This is not only because it has the highest amount of Council Housing for any London borough, it is also the only London borough with its own independent tenants federation built into the structure of Council decision making.

The Southwark Group of Tenants Organisation, or SGTO, has been in existence since the 1980s, slowly building itself up from a voluntary body to one with an experienced staff team and a wealth of knowledge and experience of Southwark. We campaign on issues of importance to council tenants and hold the Council to account, through both our own events and publications and also through participation in Council working groups and external campaigns. We are tenant-led in all of our campaigns, giving tenants the opportunity to set campaign priorities and actions. We also provide training to tenants – such as in the form of a programme of workshops on planning policy, which we are developing with Planning aid for London. Through our group meetings and campaign meetings, we give residents the opportunity to speak directly to Council decision makers, including Cabinet members and Strategic Directors.

Crucially, we are led by tenants, for tenants – our annual elections give social housing residents across the Southwark the chance to stand for leadership positions on our board. None of Southwark Council's participation mechanisms give such a direct leadership role to tenants.

The Government's November 2020 white paper, *The charter for social housing residents*, emphasises the need for social landlords to:

“Seek out best practice and consider how they engage with social housing tenants.”

The paper also commits to ensuring engagement with tenants is “tailored appropriately” to their needs, and that residents be given “tools to influence their landlord and hold them to account.”

We are disappointed to say that Southwark Council has not behaved in the spirit of this white paper. Without consultation, we were recently informed that after decades of funding, the Council would only be funding us until October 2022, and after this point we would be put out to tender as an advice service. All the while Southwark Council continues to weaken the tenant voice in the borough, by channelling resident involvement through newly created local housing forums. The agendas of these forums are set without resident involvement, no minutes are taken, and the forums themselves are poorly attended. This is no substitute for the SGTO, and the Council's failure to work with us to enact the enhancements to tenant democracy the white paper suggests will weaken tenant involvement in Southwark.

We urge the APPG for Council Housing to consider what protection might be offered to tenant federations such as our own, and what role national bodies such as the Regulator of Social Housing could play in reviving tenant involvement in the decision-making of registered social landlords.