

SGTO Speech to Cabinet, 7th December 2021

We are a group of Council residents, representing Tenants and Residents Associations from across the borough. Without genuine consent, Southwark Council have committed to the construction of rooftop and infill homes on existing council estates. We recognise the need for new council housing, and we support any scheme on an estate where residents and the Tenants and Residents Association are in support. However, without genuine resident consent, these developments cannot go ahead.

Residents are entitled to a Council that involves them in decision-making, learns from its mistakes and demonstrates accountability for all commitments it makes.

You talk of discussing and updating your Charter of Principles. Central to this are your pledges about meaningful and effective consultation and genuine engagement. Neither of these are happening. Consultations are inadequate at best and only lip service is paid to engagement. Our views are misrepresented and then parroted back to us in mangled forms as 'proof' of acquiescence. This is manufactured consent. We have written a new consultation charter, based on feedback from tenants and residents across Southwark. You should have had an opportunity to read this. We ask the Council to support these measures and to justify their response if they cannot.

Residents have experienced the full gamut of poor consultation – from leading questions to resident meetings for estates of hundreds of households being attended by less than 15 people. The Council can claim that this is not their concern, but we have a remedy.

TRAs must be involved in consultation from the beginning. This includes the setting of consultation objectives, the nature of questions posed to residents and the nature of development options given to residents. Whether or not a TRA is present on an estate, residents must be engaged in every stage of consultation, and the final planning application must be determined by a ballot of all residents. Remember that residents and TRAs have a lived understanding of an estate. They know its housing need and are aware of its problems. The Council would do well to centre them in its consultations and development plans.

The Council must be able to consult residents not only on their proposals, but on the potential impact of construction work. Informed consent is required.

Residents at Chilton Grove have lived on a construction site for two and half years, two of those under full scaffolding. Not a single rooftop home has been delivered. Building contractors continually break working hours and noise limits. Building Control have not been able to sign off on work already completed, or on a safe structural solution for the rooftop homes. For residents there is no end in sight.

The obvious lessons to learn from Chilton Grove are that delivering rooftop homes is a complex and disruptive business, that things can and do go wrong, and that a proactive mechanism to do right by residents if things don't go to plan must be the minimum requirement before they are tried again. But the Council doesn't seem to have learned this.

Is there a demonstrable procedure currently in use that identifies such lessons and puts them into practice in subsequent developments? If not, why not, and how soon can this be created?

The Council is moving forward with new rooftop homes projects across the borough, with zero assurances to the thousands of residents affected that if those projects fail, they won't face the same nightmare that residents of Chilton Grove have endured.

The possibility that any resident can consent to rooftop homes when facing such a disproportionate burden of risk is laughable.

Residents are rightly concerned about the impact of climate change in their communities. Despite your pledges on the Climate Emergency, you seem determined to claw back every bit of green space and play area for infill developments. Particularly in the population dense, inner-city areas of the borough, these green spaces are important not only as community amenities but also as carbon sinks, flood soakaway and vital green lungs for the City as a whole – if they are built over, they must be replaced in full. During this last 18 months these spaces have been essential for the physical and mental health of residents and as hubs for the community. With one hand you are promoting new allotments and supporting community gardens; with the other you're taking away our ballcourts and chopping down our trees. Residents have a right to be consulted on their greenspaces, and if a planning application for new homes is based on the reassurance that new trees be planted, the Council must evidence how it intends to do this. If desired by residents, the Council must provide these replacement trees within the estate, and in all instances, replacement of trees must be like-for-like.

Residents should not be treated like obstacles to be overcome. They must be partners in any development – fully consulted and fully consenting to development which they themselves have helped shape. The disruption and potential loss of amenity caused by new homes developments must not be ignored – residents must be presented with the full implications of development upfront. Residents and TRAs must be involved in every stage of consultation and must be given the information and support to hold the Council to account over any commitment it makes.