



Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations

Bells Gardens Community Centre,
19 Buller Close, London,

Campaigning for Housing Rights and Council Homes

SE15 6UJ

Group Meeting

Wednesday 26th January 2022

7.00pm – 9.00pm

Online Zoom Meeting

Attendance: 22

Staff: Margaret Onwuta, Amanda Carey, Jack Lewis, Rita Edmond, Ahmed Kabba

1. Welcome, Introductions and Apologies

Cris Claridge and Chris Meregini introduced themselves as Chair & Vice Chair and welcomed new faces to the meeting and thanked people for attending,

Apologies: Danielle Gregory, Ledbury Action Group, ARARA TRA

2. Minutes of Group Meeting held on 24th November 2021 and matters arising

The minutes from Group Meeting held on 24th November 2021 were agreed as a true record
Proposed: June Lewis, Seconded: Peter Davis

Matters arising:

Item 5: to set up a working group who would be tasked with compiling a questionnaire to survey residents on their views of area forums. Cris Claridge, Chris Meregini, Tina Smith and Peter Davis would be involved, facilitated by Rita Edmond and Ahmed Kabba. Cris asked that these people liaised tomorrow to arrange a first meeting for this group.

Peter Davis mentioned that he had emailed a Councillor about reopening his local TRA Hall. He copied the SGTO into the correspondence, but the Councillor has not yet responded. Rita Edmond agreed to liaise with Peter about this.

3. Co-option of Board Members for 2021/2022

Cris said that those present should have received information on this. Cris invited Margaret Onwuta to speak.

Margaret mentioned that members still had until the 14th February to fill in the expression of interest form.



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Peter Davis said that his TRA were due to have an AGM soon, where this could be discussed.

Cris explained that these are not elections. Members of a TRA can put themselves forward and will be interviewed by the Board. Cris mentioned that there are some skills gaps on the current Board, and they are looking for people with these skills or others that may be useful.

4. Formation of SGTO Campaigns Committee

Cris mentioned that at this meeting we wanted to establish the Campaigns Committee membership.

Jack Lewis said he had promoted the Committee, but some have had to liaise with their TRA to see who wants to take part. Jack explained the role of the Committee and invited attendees to express interest or to ask questions.

Tim suggested that we take over the function of the Council's resident forums. Jack said that these forums had been disappointing so far and that there is a need for a new vehicle for representing residents' views. Cris said that currently, we have a group for New Homes developments, but this doesn't affect every estate. We need a group that deals with other issues too. Cris emphasised that those on the Committee need to be from across the borough – so that we represent every area. Jack added that we want both a diversity of different areas and different experiences on the Committee.

Tim encouraged Jack to get in contact with the previous chairs of area forums, which Jack agreed to do. Tim emphasised that the Council are not allowing a dialogue for residents and that this group could be a way to create that. Cris mentioned that the current forums were ineffective. Jack said that while we had been looking for TRA members to be part of the Committee, if you are part of the SGTO Board or even involved in other groups, you could still join the Campaigns Committee.

Jennifer Newton was unsure which forum her TRA fell under. Jack pointed out that the current multi-ward forums had not been widely promoted by the Council and there is a new consultation structure that as yet, is not very well established. He told Jennifer that the Campaigns Committee would monitor and influence the SGTO's campaigning work. Cris said that we have sent out a call for Campaign Committee members who can begin the Committee's work. Jack mentioned that one individual and 6 TRAs had so far expressed interest.

Peter Davis said that he attends his multi-ward forum as an individual and did not elect the forum's chair. Peter has also received no information on the forum's constitution or his role within it. Peter was concerned that work the Council is meant to do is not replicated. The SGTO already offers an alternative to the Council's forums. Cris pointed out that the SGTO had been monitoring the Council's multi-ward forums and this wouldn't necessarily be the Campaign Committee's role.



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Chris Meregini pointed out that members may want to broaden the terms of reference of the Campaigns Committee.

Jack proposed that we set a date for the Campaigns Committee's first meeting and those who attend will be the initial members. Those in the meeting agreed that this would be the best approach. Jack said the Campaigns Committee would have to look at how the committee's priorities would relate to existing SGTO campaigns, including the multi-ward forums.

June Lewis proposed that we have the first Campaigns Committee meeting in-person, at Bells Gardens Community Centre, which has space for social distancing. June asked the SGTO to email members asking whether we should have physical meetings in Bells Gardens or continue with Zoom.

Cris said that we have to be mindful of how comfortable people would be in returning to in-person meetings, and also of health and safety concerns for residents and SGTO staff.

Tim said that the Council's Hall Committee should be consulted.

Liba suggested that the first Campaigns Committee meeting be on Zoom and later meetings could be in-person but with open doors/good ventilation.

Tanya Murat stated that she would not go into an in-person meetings due to concerns over COVID-19. Tanya mentioned that hybrid meetings could be held, allowing people to choose. Tanya did emphasise that you need the right technology for this.

Tanya was concerned that too many barriers had been set-up for joining the Campaigns Committee. She said we must work on the assumption that we need to do everything we can to encourage people to join. Tanya went on to say that the best option would be to call an open meeting and that she would help to promote the committee once it is established. It was agreed that the SGTO needs to create a Campaigns Committee that is both representative of the borough and should not exclude anyone from coming along to meetings.

Cris agreed that SGTO Staff and Board will keep looking into how we conduct our meetings. Cris is aware of how vulnerable some people are to COVID-19, and that infection rates remain high.

Julie agreed that we should have hybrid meetings; physical meetings don't work for all. Julie wanted to broaden the Campaigns Committee to members who are not TRA Committee members, saying that some felt excluded from their TRA. Cris highlighted how we have always been an umbrella body for TRAs, but we do have to discuss how we reach out further. Julie suggested the Committee be opened to all Southwark Council tenants, and that if the Committee is limited to TRAs, some residents would be left out. Cris said that if the Committee were to be broadened out, we would have to have a serious discussion of how this would happen, as our remit is as an umbrella organisation of TRAs. Members agreed that the first meeting of the Campaigns



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Committee would involve a discussion of who would be included within the Committee, and that there was a need for a robust engagement of residents from SGTO given the Council's inability to engage.

Cris pointed out that the Council currently base their engagement on individual contributions, and if we followed suit without careful planning, it might be seen as a move against TRAs.

Peter Davis stressed the need for hybrid meetings, and to revitalise TRAs. Peter was concerned that if people came to SGTO as individuals, we would be less effective as an organisation in representing resident needs.

Amanda Carey mentioned how some people on the membership database are not part of TRAs. Julie stressed that we need to grow the SGTO. Carol expressed her support for the SGTO and was worried that we would lose funding if we changed our remit. Damien said that we do need to actively look at how we engage with people and best serve residents.

Action: Set a date for the first meeting of this Committee in February. Ensure this meeting is open to the wider SGTO membership. At this meeting, the membership of the Committee (including whether those not part of a TRA can join), its structure and some possible campaigning areas will be discussed.

Action: Contact ex-area forum chairs to see if they would be interested in taking part in the Campaigns Committee.

Action: Circulate survey to membership asking for their preferences on our meetings, regarding in-person versus online.

5. Zoom versus Microsoft Teams

Cris mentioned how the Council have insisted on using Teams to conduct meetings with residents, and that our members are concerned about the accessibility of Teams. Cris says this represents a cutting off of residents from being able to be involved in consultations on issues that affect them, including rent increases. Cris mentioned that the Council had not provided her with attendance figures from the Council's online HRA Consultation session, conducted on Teams, citing data protection as a reason for this. Chris Meregini mentioned that this is similar to how the Council are reducing resident voice in their Multi-Ward Forums, which are poorly attended by residents and not recorded.

Liba mentioned that consultation is more suitable for Zoom, and training can be conducted via Zoom. Liba was concerned that if we demanded higher attendance at Council training events, the training may not be able to take place. Cris mentioned that residents needed value for money and that this is linked to accessibility and relevance. Peter Davis asked if we could make a Freedom of Information request to find out how much Zoom costs for the Council, as opposed to



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using Teams. Cris said the main issue is the fact that the Council changed over to Teams very quickly, without consulting or training residents.

Dario Blake mentioned how he tried to move his TRA over to Teams, as it was a free addition to his existing Windows subscription. But not everyone was able to use Teams easily. There were too many barriers to entry and the TRA moved back to using Zoom. Dario said we need to highlight to the Council how using Teams is decreasing engagement. He mentioned that the Council may be prioritising Teams as it saves money.

Cris suggested that we write to Councillor Alice MacDonald on this issue. Margaret emphasised that we do a survey of the membership to gain evidence on this issue, backing up our claims to the Councillor.

Jennifer Newton claimed that Teams is more for corporate communications, and Zoom is preferable for accessible, personal communications. Cris supported this and had shared the same view with Councillor Stephanie Cryan.

Cris mentioned that we raised the concerns of housing conditions decreasing but rents increasing – an issue that Kingswood Estate TRA had raised. Jack mentioned that we are arranging a Question-and-Answer session around the theme of disrepair – legal experts giving residents advice on their rights around disrepair issues. Cris mentioned that without this session, it can be hard to get legal advice on a one-to-one basis. Cris emphasised that we need to talk to the Council about its ability to meet our demands in relation to repairs. Cris asked for help in determining what questions to ask on this matter. Members agreed that we discuss the issue of repairs at the next Group Meeting and invite Christine Bramman, Head of Repairs and Maintenance to attend. Julie suggested that we also look at the contractors carrying out the repairs, as well as the Council.

6. Any Other Business

Energy Support Scheme

Amanda spoke of how SGTO has become a Tier 1 Referral organisation for this Southwark Council scheme. So far, we had referred 43 people to the scheme. Successful referrals would receive a one-off voucher to help them pay for heating costs over the winter period. Amanda said that people are petrified by the rise in costs of utilities. People are having to choose between heating and eating.

Jack confirmed that out of all of Southwark's Tier 1 referral organisations, the SGTO had processed the highest number of referrals. He encouraged people to come forward. He said that with regards to the scheme as a whole, the majority of referrals had been successful.

Beverly Graham expressed her frustration on how difficult these payments can be to access. She said the Council had not been very helpful.



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Cris asked how we can get information on the scheme out to residents. Peter said that the Council's tenant and resident officers should have information on who is most vulnerable, and that they could help us to promote the scheme. Margaret and Cris agreed that this would be a good idea.

Julie asked whether the Council could produce posters to promote this scheme. They could be put onto noticeboards in estates. Amanda pointed out that the Council are actually using a poster we designed to promote the scheme. Cris asked whether we could mail out the posters to estates. Rita mentioned that posters could be sent to Doctor's Surgeries. Rita said that this could be another way to reach vulnerable residents.

Liba asked that the poster be sent out via the WhatsApp Group and email.

Winter Pressure Fund

Margaret encouraged TRAs to contact us and apply for this funding. She said it is similar to the Connected at Christmas Fund, and it supports TRAs who want to put on events that support their elderly residents. The Fund has been promoted via email and WhatsApp. Applicants have to use the funding before the end of March.

Repairs

Peter Davis mentioned how people had been contacting him about repairs. People are coming to him with a variety of concerns, including around communal heating systems.

Agreed Actions

Action: Circulate survey to membership asking for their preferences on our meetings, regarding in-person versus online.

Action: Assess our capacity to conduct hybrid meetings – where some members can attend in-person and others online.

Action: Discuss the issue of repairs at the next Group Meeting, and whether the Council can meet our demands in this area.

Action: Distribute posters advertising the Council's Energy Support Scheme and encourage TRAs to put them up in noticeboards on estates.

Action: Email the membership with details of the Winter Pressure Fund and how they can apply. Include an application form in the email.

Meeting Closed: 9:00 pm

Date of Next Meeting: 23rd February 2022