



Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations

Bells Gardens Community Centre,
19 Buller Close, London,

Campaigning for Housing Rights and Council Homes

SE15 6UJ

Group Meeting Minutes

Wednesday 22nd June, 7 – 8:30pm

Attendance: 27

Staff: Margaret Onwuta, Amanda Carey, Rita Edmond, Jack Lewis, Silvia Rahim

1. Welcome, Introduction, and apologies

Apologies Ahmed Kabba (staff), Rose Whyte, Lindley TRA

2. Video was shown 5 years on after the Grenfell Tower fire. The group commented that it was very heart-wrenching to watch.
3. Cris Claridge (Chair) introduced herself and Chris Meregini (as Vice Chair): Cris welcome everyone to the meeting including our three new Councillors that have responded to our letter.

Cris also welcome Darren Merrill (Cabinet Member for Housing 2022-2023). Cris asked Darren to introduce himself. Darren mentioned that watching the Grenfell video reminds him how important it is to listen to residents and if they had done so the fire wouldn't have happened, and he went on to say that action should have been taken. He introduced himself as the Cabinet Member for Council Housing and Homelessness which covers a wide range in his portfolio and told the group that his role is very complex. He is at the meeting to listen to residents feelings, thoughts and answer questions members have; though he said he might not have all the answers but he wants to make sure he is kept up to date and brief properly. He asked Cris to give out his email to people who would like to contact him. He also stated that he will try to be at SGTO meeting as and when possible.

Action: SGTO to send Darren's email out to people who want to contact him.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION:

Q1: From Cris - what is your background in housing?

A: He said he had the opportunity to work in his grandfather's business in Peckham which was set up in the 1970s and that gave him a wealth of experience in the building trade. He said that he also has a reasonable idea in repairs or disrepairs, asset management, Council Housing and Building/Maintenance Industry, working in Victorian buildings, 1960s building and modern buildings.

Q2: Danielle - Southwark News recently covered the story that out of 165 managed high-rise Council Blocks, 94 of them have a 'get-out' policy rather than a 'stay-put' policy because of fire safety deficiencies. So, following on from the Grenfell video, what are the priorities now, in terms of sorting that out, and getting on top of fire safety in the borough?

A: Darren said safety is at the top of his thoughts. He has had meetings with the Director of Housing and their priorities needs to be making sure everyone one is safe and secure in their homes and this will be addressed as soon as budgets are finalised.

Q3: Tanya - Infill and Roof Top Development. The last two cabinet members for housing have disregarded residents' concerns about this subject though serious concerns on safety were raised. Will you start listening to people in estates? decouple the issue of roof top homes and infill from estate repairs? Will you be the person to fulfil the solemn pledge that the Leader of the Council Kieron Williams made when he attended an SGTO meeting when he said that he will listen to residents' concerns regarding Infill and Roof Top Development and ensure that residents are part of the decision-making process. This promise has still not been fulfilled.

A: Darren said he is now reviewing that programme and looking at what that the programme means for those residents where these developments are being proposed. He will be looking at some of the structural calculations that have been made and consider some of the government regulations that are coming through. This review hasn't been completed yet but he will follow up those developments and seriously look at the feasibility of roof top programmes and what it means for residents on estates.

The same with infill's; there is a need to have a conversation over the next few months. Whilst there is a need to supply new council houses, where they are, what they are and how they are formed needs to be discussed. Residents on estates have the answers to those questions and these conversations need to be had followed by consultation to reach a joint solution with residents.

Darren went on to say that he wants to start a proper conversation with Residents Involvement Officers, and the SGTO to see how that moves forward. He wants homes where people want to live and that gives the pride back to those estates to all council housing. Also not forgetting the residents that are suffering from damp and disrepair and he wants to get on top of what's been happening.

Cris invited Darren to visit her estate in which she lives, where the tenants located the site for homes to be built. It was their idea in the first place and 3 years on; the council haven't completed and consultation with local residents has broken down, Cris went on to say the council must take into consideration the people who already live on the estate and the overall effect that it has had on what was meant to be something that was originally supported by the local community.

Q4: Sam Can you investigate a proposal for roof top development that haven't been discussed further? Residents need to have more details about the scheme. Darren was also

asked how he intends to handle repairs and disrepair and other issues residents are facing in estates?

A: Darren is seriously looking at those areas and he is aware that residents have been left in the lurch for a considerable amount of time. He said he is also looking at things with a critical eye and won't be just rolled over into whatever his predecessors have said. He said he agrees with what has been discussed about repairs/disrepairs and knows what a good repair is and what a bad repair is and what good customer services is, and not good customer service is. He said this is a manifesto commitment and is still considering how this can be achieved. One idea is that it will be something like a repairs residents board so residents can follow up what's happening.

4. Minutes of Group Meeting held on 25th May 2022 were Agreed as a true record

Proposed by Chris Meregini, Seconded by Danielle Gregory.

There were no matters arising

5. Responses from councillors to the letter sent from SGTO, introducing them to the SGTO and inviting them to our June 2022 Group Meeting.

Cris thanked the three councillors present in the meeting, introduced them, and asked for comments on the contents of the letter they received from SGTO and how they would like to work with the Tenants Federation in the future.

Cllr Jane Salmom (Liberal Democrat) - said she always had an interest in SGTO. She said she is a leaseholder in a council block and her first experience was as a member of the Leasehold Council.

As a group, the Liberal Democrats have always wanted to reach out to leaseholders, tenants, and residents and over the years she is aware that they have gone further away. The least she can do is to listen to what's been said, so she can work with SGTO and residents.

Cllr Reginal Popoola - his experience stems from been a legal adviser for two years advising communities and the biggest thing that cropped up there was the poor housing conditions and overcrowding in the borough but also on the doorstep in which people spoke about. There is an overall duty for councillors to liaise with SGTO in terms of what they can do to further improve the services. The council funding has been cut significantly by the central government. He would like to constantly to get feedback from SGTO since they are the mouthpieces for council tenants.

Cllr Portia Mwangangye – she gave a background about herself as she came into this country in the year 2000 as a refugee and lived in a council estate for 21 years up until 2021. She first spoke as a council tenant as she was driven by her living conditions to serve as a councillor.

She spoke about poor heating and hot water system. She spoke about being homeless twice and having experienced the conditions first hand that have been horrific she pleaded for people to consider homelessness alongside other things. She said she is in the Housing Commission and has been taking notes to make sure things go through scrutiny.

Cris thanked all the councillors for attending and said they will be added to the SGTO mailing list.

Action: SGTO staff to add councillors to mailing list.

Danielle asked a question about roof top developments, and it was in the news that Southwark has the highest number of empty homes of any London Borough nearly 5000 empty properties. She wants to know whether the councillors are putting any pressure on the Council to fill up those empty homes?

Portia response was that she recently attended a workshop regarding how empty homes can be filled. She said she is on the housing and communities committee and will be looking into that. She is using her personal experience to make sure these issues are addressed.

Pascale commented that most people being rehoused are over age 55 and it's important that other groups of people have the opportunity to have council homes. If scrutinizing this how these issues are dealt with, then maybe the SGTO should invited Portia back for some updates.

Action: SGTO staff to invite Cllr Portia Mwangangye back for some updates.

Reginald commented that more consultation with residents haven't taken place properly and projects or schemes have moved on without proper consultation on those estates. Need more comprehensive processes before schemes like this are moved on.

Cris told the councillors that they have a hard task ahead of them and wanted to know if they would come on board when SGTO is fighting for the right of a proper consultation process.

- Tenants Conference:** Cris asked if there are any updates on the venue for the conference in September. The council will hold a tenants conference in October and it is important that the SGTO hold their own conference and the membership come together and work on it. Cris asked if people want to take this idea of tenants conference forward but would like to know if SGTO starts the planning if they can come on board to support. There was show of hands to confirm that the conference can go ahead.

Cris also informed the group that Silvia Rahim (who verifies accounts for TRAs) will be leaving SGTO on 29th June. Cris and other members thanked her for all her hard work. Margaret also informed the group that there will be someone filling Silvia's position.

At this point, Cris Claridge left the meeting and handed the chair over to Vice Chair, Chris Meregini.

Richard Lee mentioned that it is a vital service for the TRA's and must do everything possible to make sure it continues. He asked how comes SGTO and council tenants are not working

with the council tenant's participation officers to plan the conference? As in the past there have been a steering group to design and plan the conference. Would like to know how the council tenant's participation team under Yasmin White is going to put on a tenants' conference later on in the year without the active involvement of the TRAs in the planning and design of the conference as it seems to be a recipe for a poor conference. Are there any lobbying work and assistance been done to plan and ensure the annual tenants conference is designed by tenants of the borough?

Chris explained that the SGTO have been offered one seat within the conference as its being taken outside of the borough. This is due to the new structure and the old one has been broken and make things difficult to work with and that's why SGTO want to run a campaign to hold their own conference to bring residents together

Richard said he is not disagreeing to an SGTO conference as he sees it as a showcase at this point in time but the conference is normally run with tenants levy which tenants are all paying into and if that is going to be used to fund the conference then surely tenants and residents have a big say in it otherwise there should be a campaign strongly against it which he is ready to be involved in.

Sam asked for Richard's statement to be clarified how the council will fund the tenants conference? Chris said that SGTO doesn't yet know what means the council would use the fund the conference. Yasmin will get back to SGTO.

Action: Jack will follow up with the WhatsApp group that was set up for the tenants conference

Action: Jack to follow up with Althea Smith (Acorn TRA) regarding venue for the conference as she was helping to make some enquiries.

Action: SGTO Staff, Board Members and interested residents to plan for a September conference.

7. Any Other Business

None received.

Chris M. thanked all those who attended.

Meeting ended at 8.40pm.