



Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations

Campaigning for Housing Rights and Council Homes

28TH APRIL 2021

Dear Members

I hope that you will have opened your invitation to the SGTO Group Meeting on 28th April 2021; the first group meeting since 26th February 2020. At that meeting we watched the video showing the deputations to the cabinet meeting held on 4th February addressing the committee item, The Future of Tenant Voice Structures.

And then look what happened

Tenants Halls closed

Face-to-face meetings where people physically met in the same place, ceased

Video conferencing tools, like **Zoom**, have allowed some individuals to meet and work together productively "face-to-face" making meeting remotely more human, to help users feel and stay connected. Good for some of us, quite scary & stressful for others and for many, impossible.

But still the council has attempted to go ahead with the proposed tenants voice structures. The promised 'last tenants council meeting' did not take place. Consultation with T&RAs exists only where technology makes this possible, and some T&RAs remain, but find it difficult to function.

Those of us who have attempted to participate in the local area housing forums, tenants & homeowners councils, fail to understand how it is possible to have any impact or make any representation on behalf of the people who have trusted us over many years. Many key people with expertise, experience and most importantly commitment to the people who do not have a voice, have withdrawn from this process and continue their missions, but not in partnership with the council.

The achievements of T&RAs, working alongside their communities, across the borough are extraordinary and immense.

It is sad to reflect that the council went ahead and closed down the existing tenants' structure and failed to replace it with any kind of structure. There is still no working structure in place and to most tenant activists and former activists this is a shameful situation.

Imagine how effective both the council and the tenants movement would have been if they had continued to work together while discussions on a new structure could have been discussed.

Borough wide, thousands of food parcels have been distributed to people living on estates, and street properties by volunteers from their local T&RAs. Some tenant's groups have worked hand in hand with local organisations of all shapes and sizes to address the needs of families and individuals in their area. The positive outcome of these times is that partnerships have been formed that will go on working, long after the pandemic is under control.

WHAT HAS THE SGTO BEEN DOING DURING THESE EXTRAORDINARY TIMES?

With the exception of our caretaker Gerry who has been furloughed, the SGTO staff team has worked from home and led by our manager have delivered and continue to deliver an enviable service to our borough wide membership. This, despite the fact that the staff team have experienced their own life issues, including Amanda, who contracted Covid. The team has been a member of staff short for the greater part of lockdown. Sadly, Vashti, having been on sick leave for several months, has now left the organisation.

Bells Gardens Community Centre has been closed six days a week, opening every Tuesday for the Rastafarian Food Bank to function. Amanda has been using that opportunity to provide a printing service for T&RAs to enable them to keep those members who do not have the benefit of access to social media to receive information through their doors.

Steered by Margaret as senior manager, the services provided by the SGTO during lockdown are a result of a focused, close working staff team and I will attempt to list a few of these.

Working with Age UK to have tenants submit Easter cards that were distributed to isolated older people

Working with tenants to have orchestra performances on their green spaces

Linking tenants with groups providing weekly food parcels and hot meals; many providing doorstep deliveries.

Regular Tenant Open Sessions' bringing tenants together to discuss housing issues.

Now preparing for our first online group meeting!

Assisting T&RAs to deal with their specific estate issues

Helping to develop initiatives and assisting with problem solving with individual T&RAs.

Providing links for networking with T&RAs and like-minded organisations.

As would be expected, individual staff members have expertise in distinct areas, resulting in certain initiatives being led by specific staff members

Amanda has prioritised:

Printing - From April 2020, providing an essential print service for TRA's to be able to distribute important information and keep residents updated.

Total printing produced during lockdown to date 93,510

Devices - Setting up and distributing tablets and various smartphones to residents to enable those without any sources to get connected and involved to break isolation.
Total devices given away during lockdown to date 48

Courses - Registering and providing access with step-by-step instructions to various online training courses to give people the opportunity to enhance, learn new skills and gain knowledge in different areas to aid them in their TRA work or to gain employment.
Total courses provided to date 56

Launch of Accounts Manual – Silvia has been working with T&RA treasurers and has continued to provide the Accounts Verification service. Silvia has initiated the launch of the Accounts Manual, providing useful guidelines for treasurers to follow. Silvia has informed and shared information with members about the SGTO's free online courses.

The Development of a Tenants' Movement Map and Website. Led by Margaret, this project is soon to be launched

The first online Youth Forum has been developed and Ahmed is working towards increasing the capacity participation

Ahmed has engaged with T&RAs and residents on a daily basis and as a spin off to this he has been able to identify lonely senior citizens and coordinate the delivery of hot & cold food to vulnerable tenants. Working in partnership with Community Southwark Ahmed has been able to support T&RAs with Lottery Funded Projects.

The T&RA Support WhatsApp Group, managed by Ahmed was initiated in April 2020. T&RA delegates, individual tenants and representatives from like-minded organisations have joined the group. The membership grows weekly and shares ideas, information, points of view and offers of support to each other. There have been a couple of occasions when discussion has become heated, but hey that is the nature of the beast, and on every occasion the end-result has been on some issues, to 'agree to differ' and on other, consensus. I personally have met with many people for the first time who have pooled a wealth of information and experiences.

Aided by Rhiannon, residents with shared concerns have formed their own focus groups and an example of this is the establishment of the New Homes Network collaborating with tenants who are negotiating with the council about new homes being built on their estates.

Rhiannon has established a unique way to get our message across with **SomeWeekly FM and online radio** with now over 50 broadcasts interviewing tenants, politicians and housing activists documenting the issues and solutions during the covid crisis.

Bringing **fuel justice** to the forefront of politicians' and landlords' agendas has been a major piece of work for the SGTO and is seen as a key issue at this present time. Rhiannon has been working on this issue and explains that fuel poverty affected over 10,000 residents in Southwark before covid. We know that this number would have been exacerbated during the

past year. Since October tenants that live in properties with district heating have been left without reliable heating and hot water. The offering from their landlord has been expensive plug-in heaters. These plug-in heaters have increased tenants' electric bills by £40 per month. Finally, Southwark councils' complaints policy has been updated **but** there is no public information about their new compensation policy.

We have been working with Southwark's exchequer service and public health team to help the council prepare for next winter and SGTO have produced a Southwark Partners Agency Report collating front line services experience of fuel poverty in the borough this year so far.

[**Read this report here!**](#)

The SGTO has also aligned with other bodies, fighting for tenants' rights both locally and nationally, a prime example of this being the Empty Homes Campaign.

The SGTO Board meets monthly, and members have upheld their commitment to the tasks they were to undertake. They have faced many challenges in the past months since being elected in September 2020. This has been no mean feat with all the other demands on their lives. My thanks to the members for their loyalty to the SGTO and to Margaret, who as Company Secretary has kept us focused.

You will be aware, that whilst the SGTO Accounts have been scrupulously audited and approved by the Charities Commission & Company's House, and are available for your perusal, the Annual General Meeting did not take place and Margaret, as the Company Secretary has communicated this to the governing bodies.

With the approval of the membership the expectation is that elections will take place in September following the signing of the contract with the council.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

The Contract Process

The intended timetable for the Council's Contract with the SGTO originally outlined that elections to the Joint Tenant & Homeowner Council (JTHF) would take place in December 2020. The JTHC would meet to agree contract priorities and consultation process in April 2021 and following that, the council would perform a borough wide consultation exercise in May.

You will know that the Joint Tenant & Homeowners Council was never elected, and the borough wide consultation is now taking place without any agreement with tenants & homeowners.

Many of us have received a link to take part in a consultation on Independent Advice Services for T&RAs and residents. The questions presumably have been dreamt up by council officers, without any of the promised consultation. One observation by myself and some others is that the questions by and large do not relate to services you want the SGTO to provide.

You will also have been invited to join a Focus Group for T&RA representatives on the 4th May. You are asked to indicate by email if you wish to be part of that focus group, but it does not indicate how representatives will be selected.

Can I urge you please to complete the questionnaire? Ensure that the council hears what you have to say about the future of the SGTO. For me, the emphasis must be on the fact that we are an independent federation, and we must be allowed to continue with the unfettered right to act independently in all aspects of our work.

FINALLY, CAN I DRAW YOUR ATTENTION TO THE GROUP MEETING INVITE?

The first thirty minutes of the meeting will be entirely focused on seeking a response from Cllr Kieron Williams about the actions of the then Housing Cabinet member Cllr. Pollock. Given the short time we have, to discuss this, can I ask you please to join us promptly at 7pm? We will admit people from 6.45pm to let us start at 7pm. I know for some of you with work and family commitments this may not be possible but join us later anyway. I will be asking Cllr Williams to specifically address the questions that we put to him when we asked him to confirm that

No other members were aware or involved in this twitter account

No other known elected members have an anonymous social media account that conflicts with your code of conduct as an elected member

Your investigations will include understanding the impact that Cllr Pollak's leadership has had on the attitudes of designated project officers ie: those involved in new homes consultations Measures have been put in place to demonstrate that this behaviour will not be accepted within the council. What are they?

Also, what extent did Cllr Pollak's leadership have an impact on how community groups are perceived by Southwark Council as a whole?

I hope that you will have questions prepared that can follow on from his response.

The item following this is a critical look at the council's proposed Allocations Policy and will be led by Izzy Koksai, Housing Action Southwark & Julie Osmond, Southwark Law Centre who have studied the implications of the proposals. Councillors are not invited to this part of the meeting; this is our chance as the voice of tenants to have some input into a policy that will have a huge impact on the lives of present & future council tenants.

I close by saying:

During the past year, we have all been affected in specific ways. I personally can relate to this with the loss of my brother with only one opportunity to see him to say goodbye. Many of you will have directly experienced loss and hardship and yet continue to show compassion and give hands on support to those around you.

I am privileged to be a part of an organisation made up of this, sometimes feisty but always caring, diverse group of people and I can only say a big thank you to you all for sticking around in these difficult times.

Cris Claridge

SGTO Chair

