

COUNCIL ASSEMBLY

TUESDAY 29 NOVEMBER 2011

Including themed debate on housing

SOME COMMUNITY VIEWS

Resident 1

My housing priorities – it has to be safe. That's priority number one. And it has to be secure. And we have to ensure that it meets all the minimum standards.

Resident 2

To keep all the one-stop shops open – especially for the sake of the elderly. We also need more council housing because of the homeless.

Resident 3

My housing priority at the moment is to have the condition and the environment around my house safe, clean, and in a proper environmental condition.

Resident 4

My priority is to get a bigger place because of the number of children I have. I'd also like to make sure in the future that we have security gates kept on our estates.

Resident 5

When you say you've listened to people, you need to publish what your outcomes are, and who you say you've spoken to. Because the misconception is that whatever the council aims to do, there is a 'them and us' perception, which may not necessarily be true. There could be better working mechanisms put in place, without being a 'them and us' approach.

Resident 6

Tenants, residents, and homeowners should come together and pool our ideas, and come up with a solution, so that we could then try to make sure that everyone who genuinely needs a home has one. We could do this by demonstrations, leafleting, and making people generally aware of the problems of the homeless as well as residents.

Resident 7

Social landlords should allow consultations to finish fully before they start to implement anything.

Resident 8

We need to bring communities back together again. We should all understand how to move forward – councillors, resident involvement officers, and residents all working together to make our estates better places to live.

Resident 9

I'm glad this assembly will include a debate on housing. Council meetings should be about real issues like this, not about how many trees should be planted, or parking restrictions.

Resident 10

'Southwark Life' is a nice little magazine. But it doesn't always use the opportunity to explain things. For example, it could explain the bidding process for housing, and why people may not be getting anywhere.

Resident 11

Yes, let's make more use of Southwark Life to promote local democracy. Why not have an opinion poll in the magazine? It could be on some aspect of housing, or community safety, schools, or transport.

People could fill this in and send it back by Freepost. Then the following month, or even two months later, you could feedback the results of the poll. It would feel like real consultation and empowerment.

Resident 12

Councillors need to tap into their local organisations, and be visible on housing estates. They need to go to more public events. A lot of what they hear will be word of mouth but that's valuable too. It will give them a first hand insight into housing in Southwark.

Resident 13

I've never been to a council meeting of any kind in my life and I wouldn't go unless it had something to do with me and my family. An issue like housing would get me there.

Resident 14

Housing is a big challenge in Southwark. I know lots of good people who've been waiting years and years for a house, so there must be something wrong with the system.

Resident 15

We've just moved to Peckham and it took me years to bid (for a house). I didn't even have a bedroom for myself where I was. I've got children and I gave the bedroom to them. I had to eat, live, and sleep in the only other room we had. They told me that unless I was ill or something like that I didn't have a chance. But I fought my corner and when they offered me this place with an extra bedroom I took it.

It's not just me. It's everybody. If I thought it would make a difference I'd get involved in meetings and come to assemblies, but you can talk and nothing ever happens.

Resident 16

If you take an issue like housing, there are several areas of interest or concern among residents about housing, which might mean having to hold several meetings. You won't solve it all in one assembly.

Resident 17

Community development and engagement should be at the core of every housing department or office. It shouldn't just be (the role of) community engagement or scrutiny. The same goes for children's services and young people. Every department should do it.

Resident 18

I think all this high-priced housing is very divisive. We've been here for years and years in council flats and all these penthouses are popping up. I get the feeling that we're being pushed out more and more to make room for high-priced housing.

I know a banker who's paying £600 a week to a private landlord for a flat in a small development near me. But he can afford that because he's a banker.

Resident 19

A lot of these private landlords and developers have no social conscience whatsoever. They buy up properties and then do nothing to improve them. My partner's still has no central heating or a shower. And they keep putting the rent up until you can't afford it anymore.

It seems to me that the standard in social housing in Southwark is way above a lot of the private housing. I know the council gets a lot of stick for poor quality housing but it's much worse in a lot of private housing. Better homes standards need to apply to private landlords too.

Resident 20

I was born in Nigeria and I've been in Southwark for many years now. I live in a housing association development and I love it there. People are very friendly. From time to time the councillors write to us asking how everything is and making sure we are well cared for, and I appreciate that.

Resident 21

Communication is the big challenge when it comes to housing. Lots of people find it difficult to speak out and make their views known. Some fear that it will go against them or that their housing officer will know about it.

They need to be reassured that they are part of the democratic system, as members of the community, and they need to be fully involved in decision-making. They should be able to speak up without fear.

Resident 22

I'd like to see the repairs improve. They put out this slogan that "Southwark is working for you", but they're not really. They've got about six ways of taking your money. By post, at the housing office, by debit card, and so on, and they're all very efficient. But when it comes to having something repaired, there's nobody available. I've been waiting since December to have a roof leak looked at.

Resident 23

I'm a council tenant and I'm happy with my current status. The council provides a very good service and housing stock is generally good. But local residents need to be organised and work closely with the council to maintain a good level of service.

Resident 24

My priority as a council tenant is keeping up with rent and not being in arrears. In the future I would like to get out of council accommodation and possibly buy my own home. The council and other social landlords need to monitor and check that social housing is maintained and looked after to a high standard. Some estates in Peckham are an example of how some estates have fallen into disrepair.

On my estate the majority of residents care about how the estate looks. We make sure the bins are not overflowing. We've got together to have the lights fixed on landings and repaired the guttering.

Resident 25

I'm a council tenant but I'm not happy with things as they are. I want to transfer from my current accommodation due to a change of circumstances a few years ago. I'm still unclear about my position on a transfer and I haven't been visited by the housing caseworker.

The council needs to create a better link with the housing ombudsman. It needs to get caseworkers and housing officers to make regular visits to tenants.

Resident 26

When I spilt up with my partner I had nowhere to go and I tried to get a council flat but I was told by a housing officer that I needed to find private accommodation and the council would pay my rent. I did that and I've been trapped in the system ever since.

The council is still paying my rent. I want to go back to work to pay my own way, but I couldn't afford child care costs as well. If I could get a council property I'd be able to pay for child care and meet my other expenses, including rent. There's hundreds like me.

Resident 27

Many families - especially vulnerable ones - are on low incomes and find it hard to make phone calls to request repairs due to lengthy waiting times when they're placed on hold, and they don't have a landline or sufficient credit to make calls.

Visiting a housing office is not always a viable solution either as they have children with special needs or they're caring for a vulnerable adult.

I think the solution is to provide a mobile phone number for the repairs service to request repairs or offer a call back service for repairs.

Resident 28

Lots of families have no option, when they're homeless, other than to rent privately under the rent deposit or fee finder schemes. But this affects the most vulnerable families on low incomes, especially when they have to contribute to their rent and are living in poverty as they struggle to pay part of their rent as well as utility bills.

Many are left with little or no money for food and heating, especially in the winter months. The situation is made worse by increased fuel charges and properties where there's a lack of draught exclusion, or older, cold properties.

Some families simply can't afford to go to work, pay rent, and also cover childcare costs. They feel caught in a private renting trap.

Resident 29

Some families are trying to support a grandparent or older relative to downsize their property. But there's an assumption that a single older adult would need only one bedroom, while giving up a 3,4, or 5 bedroom property.

Many of these grandparents and older relatives are a vital source of support to their families who live nearby, and they'd prefer to downsize to a 2 bed property to maintain the same level of support, like looking after grandchildren to help working parents who do shift work or providing respite care for their grandchildren.

The result is that single older adults continuing to live in a property far too big for their needs while homeless larger families need them. I suggest that tenants should be allowed to downsize to a 2-bed property if they're giving up a 3/4/5 bed property.

We should also conduct a review of the assessment system and evaluate housing stock where single tenants are occupying large properties.

Resident 30

Repairs, maintenance and improvements are a big issue in privately rented properties, especially where there's no clear responsibility for repairs.

Privately owned property rented to a housing association who then rent it to Local Authority as a temporary accommodation is a case in point. There are lots of tenants living in these circumstances who can't get repairs done because landlords don't adhere to guidance or policies on repair deadlines. In cases like these tenants also have to pay on top of their housing benefit award for a property that's substandard or even dangerous.

THE HOMELESS

Views of a Southwark voluntary sector project worker and some service users

Our day centre is a gateway to a range of support services under a single roof. It's an environment where people feel secure, respected and valued.

We're currently working with around 200 people per day. Almost half of them sleep rough and close to a quarter of them are living in council or housing association flats. The rest are in hostels, stay with friends, or are squatting.

Last year we managed to find accommodation for over 200 people, and we've continued to support them beyond that to find jobs or to deal with all the formalities of their tenancies and welfare benefits.

Homeless 1

I came here as an asylum seeker in 2002 and stayed with a friend until recently but he kicked me out. I sleep now near London Bridge by night and sit on a bench there most of the day.

I love this country but I can't work. My dream is to be a bus driver. That's what I did, but I'm not allowed to take up employment here. I just want to pay my way and get my life back on track, with a wife and children.

Homeless 2

There's a reason why people are homeless. It could be something medical or whatever. It's not a life choice. We get woken up by the police at 3 or 4 in the morning and we're told to move on. Some of those security guards are worse when they throw buckets of water over you.

Homeless 3

I've been fifteen years homeless on and off. The off times are when I visit my kids and I sofa surf. Everyone needs a place to sleep. Some of us homeless ones like to sleep on our own. Others like to sleep in groups because they feel safer.

Homeless 4

I've been on the streets for around six years. We're one big family and we look out for each other. We can't stay in one place longer than a day though. You've got to keep moving.

Homeless 5

You need to start listening to homeless people and hear what they want. A place like this day centre gets you in out of the rain and feeds you.

Homeless 6

The one thing that's good about being homeless is that you've got your own freedom. Some people actually prefer it on the streets. You make a lot more friends and you don't have to worry about bills coming in your door.

Homeless 7

I just want a place of my own and I want to work. I don't want benefits. I want to earn things with my own sweat but I can't. I'm an asylum seeker and I'm forbidden from taking employment.

Homeless 8

My GP told me I wouldn't survive another winter so Southwark sorted me out. I've just got a place in sheltered accommodation.

I've got my own saucepans, and my own bed. Funny thing is I sleep on the floor in a sleeping bag. My mate got a place too and he sleeps on the balcony. It gets in your blood after a while.