

<b>Item No.</b> 9.	<b>Classification:</b> Open	<b>Date:</b> 16 April 2013	<b>Meeting Name:</b> Cabinet
<b>Report title:</b>		Report into TRA Halls and Communal Rooms (Housing, Environment, Transport & Community Safety Scrutiny Sub-Committee)	
<b>Ward(s) or groups affected:</b>		All	
<b>From:</b>		Overview & Scrutiny Committee	

## RECOMMENDATION

1. That the cabinet notes the recommendations of the review of TRA Halls and Communal Rooms, and that the relevant cabinet members bring back a report to cabinet, in order to respond to the overview and scrutiny committee, within eight weeks.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2. This is the final report arising from the scrutiny review of TRA Halls and Communal Rooms.
3. The council has taken a number of actions in the past year to address weaknesses in the way TRA community halls have been managed. These are being co-ordinated centrally by the Resident Involvement Team (now merged with Community Engagement). The Housing, Environment, Transport and Community Safety Scrutiny Sub-Committee decided to look into this issue whilst setting up its work programme in June 2012. The sub-committee was aware of the on-going work and the formation of a tenants' halls working party to make recommendations on guiding principles and on the ongoing investment programme. The sub-committee felt that it was important for members to provide an external perspective on this work and to make other contributions which could improve the way the council approaches the issue of TRA community halls.
4. The Overview & Scrutiny Committee considered the report at its meeting on 11 March 2013. The committee welcomed the report and the valuable work of the sub-committee.

## HOUSING, ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT & COMMUNITY SAFETY SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

5. The sub-committee's recommendations are listed below.
  1. **HRA Community Halls data held by the council:** The council does not currently have a comprehensive database of its own TRA Halls which provides detailed information on the status, rent, location and management contacts for every hall. As the Senior Management Team Paper referred to in this report notes: "Collection and maintenance of management information has been poor with inadequate arrangements for checks on

aspects of their management and condition. At times this has been over reliant on voluntary submission of information rather than proactive checking by the council.” Given that these are highly valuable assets, it is important that up to date information is kept on all these properties. The council should never be “unsure” about the status of any of its TRA Halls.

The sub-committee recommends that, as part of the capital investment programme, the current data is refreshed, subsequently kept fully up to date and systems put in place to ensure that this data never becomes out-dated again.

2. **Advertising Training:** The sub-committee believes more could be done to advertise what is on offer via training paid for via the Tenants’ Levy. We would recommend that the Tenants Hall Working Party discuss a new communications plan for the training programme to ensure as many tenants as possible know about the courses on offer.
3. **Composite Courses:** The sub-committee has made the observation that offering 22 separate courses may be excessive and that it may be advisable to cut the number of courses and consolidate training. In particular we would recommend a course entitled “How to run a TRA Hall” which covered the basics of running halls. This is a suggestion put to the sub-committee by the Chair of a TRA.
4. **Training feedback:** The sub-committee considered the feedback statistics on the training currently provided. This feedback is overwhelmingly positive; with virtually no negative comments received whatsoever. This is clearly reflective of the positive experience of those attending. However, the sub-committee feels that it may be worth getting a fresh pair of eyes to review the training on offer.

The sub-committee recommends that the TRA Halls Working Party commissions officers to review the training offer and the method for collecting feedback.

5. **Tenancy agreements:** The sub-committee believes that it is no longer acceptable for the Council and TRAs to manage their relationship regarding TRA Community Halls according to a mish-mash of leases, tenancies and informal arrangements. The case study examples given by officers show there is a need to put this relationship on a formal footing which makes clear the responsibilities of all parties with regard to the halls. The sub-committee also believes that, to ensure fairness and consistency, all TRA community halls managed by TRAs should be subject to the same standard agreement. The sub-committee would ask that officers investigate the legal and administrative issues further and work with TRA to introduce a standardized system at the earliest opportunity
6. **A fair rents system:** The sub-committee believes that it is wrong and unfair that some TRAs are paying significant amounts of money in rent and charges, whilst others are paying nothing. The sub-committee does not believe that the council should be seeking to make *additional* money from the rents paid by TRAs for halls. Further, we believe that the rents which are paid should be fair and that all TRAs should be making at least some contribution, no matter how small. Our suggestion would be that the Halls are categorised by officers (and agreed with the tenants halls working

party) according to their revenue raising potential. The rent levels should then be set according to the revenue raising potential of the hall itself. However, because the total amount of money collected will not rise and because there will be 50+ additional halls making at least some contribution, the rent being paid even by higher category halls should be far from punitive.

The sub-committee recommends that officer draw up a new rents system based on the principle of halls with greater revenue raising potential paying more, but with the overall rent receipt for the council remaining unchanged

7. **Provision across the borough:** The sub-committee believes that it is important that we do not pretend to start from a blank sheet of paper. TRA Community Halls have thrived in certain parts of the borough for a reason and their location, in part, reflects the tenant population of these parts of the borough. There is potential for a better use of resources in some parts of the borough and a need to address gaps in provision in others. The sub-committee would recommend that officers are tasked with identifying those TRAs which are genuinely struggling for space to carry out their meetings and activities. Once a list has been drawn up officers should work with those TRA in identifying possible sharing arrangements with the variety of other council owned premises and community spaces which may be local to those TRAs
8. **Advertising and information to boost involvement and use of halls:** It is interesting that 70% of people state that they never or rarely use the TRA community hall that they have access to. Of those who said they had never used the hall in the survey, a number of the comments indicated that they knew very little about what the hall was used for or even if they were allowed to use it. It was also noticeable that when tenants were asked how the running of their hall might be improved a significant number volunteered that better advertising and more information would be very welcome. To address this issue the sub-committee recommends that all TRAs have a website, a physical bulletin board outside of the TRA and a quarterly newsletter. New residents on estates should also be informed of the contact details of their TRA. The sub-committee suggests that these actions be taken up as part of the work programme of the TRA Halls Working Party who can then communicate with both officers and TRAs to identify what further resources and training could be provided to implement this recommendation
9. **TRA Community Halls where there is acute under-use:** Clearly, for some TRA Community Halls the problem of under-use is more acute and needs more urgent attention. For some of these halls the situation is now finally coming to a head because of the council's multi-million pound investment programme. The council simply cannot justify investing £60,000 – £120,000 to revamp buildings which are being left virtually unused, particularly when these buildings could be converted in to new council homes. The sub-committee suggests the following principle be applied:

Where a hall is being used less than 15% of the time during “core hours”, the hall should not receive significant financial investment and it should be scheduled for conversion into new homes (where this is possible). The definition of “core hours” could be informed by contributions from the

Tenants Halls Working Party. A list of halls which officers suspect may be acutely under-used should be brought before the Working Party.

Once agreed, halls on this list should be subject to an assessment. The assessment could be made over a one month reference period and informed by a diary of events provided by the TRA itself. The assessment should be up-to-date, rather than based on historic information about usage. Where lack of investment, or other factors beyond the control of the TRA, are the central reason for under-use, discretion should be applied

10. **Defunct TRAs:** Where the TRA is defunct and the hall is not being used at all, the building should be considered for conversion into new homes. This decision should include consideration of any realistic possibility of the TRA being re-launched in the near future.
11. **Stock Condition:** The sub-committee is aware that the Tenants Halls Working Party has been working constructively with officers to move forward the TRA Halls investment programme. It should be noted that the early part of the scheme has been dominated by investment decisions that are relatively uncontroversial. A point will come in the not-too distant future more difficult decisions will need to be confronted. The main difficulties will be in considering investment in properties where two conditions apply:
  - a) Where it is simply impossible to make the Hall compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act.
  - b) Where there are already alternative facilities available in the area, and there is the possibility of sharing taking place.

TRA Community Halls which fit either (or both) of these criteria might then be converted into new council homes. Clearly, decisions of this type need to be made in conjunction with the TRAs concerned. The sub-committee would recommend that all parties enter into these discussions in a constructive way. We would suggest two guiding principles with regard to these decisions:

Where potential sharing or DDA compliance are clearly issues, the council must not waste money by inappropriately upgrading TRA community halls simply because this is the line of least resistance.

Where conversion into new council homes is appropriate, both TRAs and council officers must recognise the important of securing value to money.

Where TRA community halls are converted into new council homes, comparable replacement facilities must be made available either through sharing another nearby hall or by other means (e.g. new build).

12. **Whistle-blowing procedure:** In the tenants survey 62% of people said that, if they became aware of fraudulent activity or mis-management, they would not know who they would report it to. This is unsurprising as neither the council nor TRAs have a standard whistle-blowing procedure in place with regard TRA Community Halls. The sub-committee believes that it is important to have a streamlined whistle-blowing agreement in place as a matter of urgency. The most preferable vehicle for delivering this would be

for the whistle-blowing procedure to appear as an appendix to the new tenancy agreements between the council and the TRAs. The details and the wording of the whistle-blowing procedure should be agreed with the Tenants Halls Working Party and should include a role in whistle-blowing for ward councillors.

13. **Multiple key-holders:** Several of the case studies show the problems that can arise when just one person literally “holds the key” to a HRA Community Hall. The sub-committee would recommend that for every TRA Community Hall, there are at least two, and ideally three individuals given keys to the premises. For security reasons, the sub-committee believes there should be a maximum of 3 keys in circulation at any one time.
14. **Multiple signature withdrawals.** Fraud is rare in Southwark’s TRAs, but we must always be vigilant over safe-guarding against financial malpractice. As the case studies on possible examples of fraud showed, the practice of allowing single signature withdrawals from HRA Community Hall bank accounts is inadvisable. Even in situations where the single signatory’s conduct has always been beyond reproach, this is an unwise arrangement. New committee members come and go, and where a system has been adopted with one person in mind, there may soon be another person put in their place. The sub-committee recommends that all Southwark TRAs handling money generated through TRA Community Halls should operate a system of multi-signatory withdrawals.
15. The council is embarking on a homes building over the coming years. The council should continue to consider the provision of new community space where significant concentrations of new building take place.

## BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Overview & Scrutiny Committee Agenda 11 March 2013. The document is available on this web page (item 7): <a href="http://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/ie/ListDocuments.aspx?CId=308&amp;MId=4337&amp;Ver=4">http://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/ie/ListDocuments.aspx?CId=308&amp;MId=4337&amp;Ver=4</a>	Scrutiny Team 160 Tooley Street London SE1 2QH	Peter Roberts 020 7525 4350

## APPENDICES

No.	Title
Appendix A	Report of the Housing, Environment, Transport & Community Safety Scrutiny Sub-committee

## AUDIT TRAIL

<b>Lead Officer</b>	Shelley Burke, Head of Overview & Scrutiny	
<b>Report Author</b>	Peter Roberts, Scrutiny Project Manager	
<b>Version</b>	Final	
<b>Dated</b>	4 April 2013	
<b>Key Decision?</b>	No	
<b>CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER</b>		
<b>Officer Title</b>	<b>Comments Sought</b>	<b>Comments included</b>
Director of Legal Services	N/a	N/a
Strategic Director of Finance and Corporate Services	N/a	N/a
Chief Officers	N/a	N/a
<b>Cabinet Member</b>	N/a	N/a
<b>Date final report sent to Constitutional Team</b>		4 April 2013