

## **Tenants Council**

### **Interim response to the independent research entitled 'Improving tenant and homeowner engagement in Southwark – a review.**

This report is prepared on behalf of the Tenants Council as an interim response to the Housing and Community Safety Sub – committee and we would see it as a precursor of more detailed discussions on the recommendations contained within the report and whether those recommendations are feasible and capable of implementation.

I attended the Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Sub-committee on the 7<sup>th</sup> February this year at the invitation of the Chair to discuss Resident Involvement. I was here in my role as Vice-chair to represent the Tenants Council.

I raised the problem that to all intents tenant's involvement was none existent and support and servicing and structures that were in place to allow tenants aspirations and voices to be heard are ignored. I pointed out that this was not a new problem and was increasingly becoming more acute as the Council and its officers became less and less engaged. The Council should be aware that the requirement to consult is set out in statute.

I pointed out that the Director of Housing had not attended Tenants Council for over two years. The Cabinet Member, unlike her predecessor who regularly attended Tenants Council, has attended once in the year. That is a situation that has not improved and whilst Councillor Cryan agreed that she would meet with the Chair and Vice-chair of the Tenants Council on a six weekly cycle following the meeting of the Tenants Council to review the recommendations and resolve how to take them forward and action them; this hasn't happened. Indeed the only issues she has discussed with us recently was her concerns that sandwiches was provided to delegates and others attending meetings of Tenants Council and that the Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations, in line with the arrangements in place in the Council, was providing taxis for disabled and vulnerable attendees at their meetings. I remember with some amusement and distaste the machinations of Officers when asked if the wellbeing and safety of tenants was less important than those Council users of the taxi services.

At a recent chaotic meeting at the Old Kent Road Fire Station, Cllr Cryan was asked why she didn't attend Tenants Council. Her response was that she was busy in her Ward. I include this response to illustrate the reluctance to engage with us. I also point out that our recommendations are ignored and the Senior Officer responsible for progressing displays no enthusiasm to do so. In fact, he gives the impression that, like his boss, he would rather we didn't have a voice at all.

Let me come now to the report itself and how it came to be drafted.

On 7<sup>th</sup> February, I suggested a Working Party be set up of Councillors, Officers and Residents to examine the issues and suggest solutions.

The Cabinet Member for Housing, like a rabbit out of a hat, made an offer of £50,000 to fund an independent review of tenant involvement. I was somewhat surprised by this offer from a cash strapped Council who intends to pass on the high costs of calls on the 0300 line to the Call Centre to save the Council an anticipated £65,000.

I attended, again on behalf of the Tenants Council, the meeting to interview and select a contractor to undertake the research. I can report that the successful contractor was not my preference. There were two others that displayed far better understanding of tenant structures and involvement. When I raised this, it was pointed out that I was there in an advisory capacity and officers would have the final say.

**I do love being patronised!**

So, what does the report say and purport to achieve?

It would appear to further diminish the role of tenant participation and reduce impact from the Tenants Movement. It displays a high level of officer involvement and takes upon the authors the role of proposing remedies that were not discussed or trusted.

The report comments on the effectiveness of the Tenants Fund and the SGTO. The views in the report were never discussed or tested with the Tenants Fund Management Committee. As far as I can ascertain the SGTO were not consulted before the report was compiled. I, and other tenants here tonight, are of the opinion that these are the views of officers rather than the views of tenants.

The 126 pages of the well-padded report has the effect of widening the gap between the aspirations of tenants and senior officers who indicate they would rather not participate with us despite their statutory requirement to do so. It widens the gap between us rather than closes it.

The two main recommendations, but not the only recommendations, are that the Tenants and Homeowners Council should merge. The information I have is that the Homeowners Council recent meetings have been inquorate and the organisation is largely dominated by absentee landlords, some of whom are large stockholders of dwellings that were previously in Council management.

It should be noted that the aims and aspirations of the Tenants Council and the Homeowners Council are often diametrically opposed and this is particularly exacerbated by the role and aspirations of absentee landlords whose occupants are often seen as responsible for some of the occupancy problems that are in effect caused by the lack of effective management.

However those are the kinds of problems that will render this kind of merger unworkable.

I have tried to envisage how the recommendation that the Area Housing Forums and the Neighbourhood Councils merge will work. I cannot imagine how this could happen. The function of the Area Housing Forums is to discuss and monitor at local level services and management of the housing stock in their areas of benefit and to receive reports from, and make recommendations to the Tenants Council. I formed the opinion that the proposers of this have very little understanding of Resident Involvement and have made very little effort to research the outcomes of their recommendations.

I attended three of the interview sessions and I have discussed with several tenants who have attended other interviews and all are of the opinion that they had very little to do with resident involvement. I can report that at one session the researcher was more concerned to advise us on how to set up and run a tenants association. When we pointed out we knew how to do that the interview sort of fizzled out.

The report leans very heavily in favour of the views and recommendations of the officers and indeed congratulates them on their involvement but makes no mention of the contribution by tenants and residents. The authors of the report in their introduction deal with the Council's failure to honour its side of the agreement to develop, support, and foster resident involvement and participation. Dare I say that officers have little understanding or will to involve themselves in it.

At a time when the effects of not listening to the voice of tenants is manifest in the tragic fire in Grenfell Tower. The intention to widen the gap further between the Council and the residents of its housing stock when all the evidence is to the contrary needs to be carefully considered. In the borough, that had the fire in Lakanal House, tenants have raised concerns about the fire safety, integrity and structure of the four tower blocks on Ledbury Estate. This has resulted in the blocks being patrolled by Fire Wardens and have officers based in the Tenants Hall on the estate. It has heightened the fear factor. It is significant that these are not problems that the Council were unaware of, the residents have been raising the problems with Council for years and were ignored. It was only after they had consulted with the London Fire Brigade and with advice from the SGTO on how they should organise and the threat to seek support from the media to highlight their problems and get the Council to listen and act that things started to happen. Until this happened the Council, and in particular the Housing Department, despite being aware of the problems for years had ignored them.

This is not participation this is the Council reacting with its arm twisted up its back.

I have highlighted this case to illustrate the effect and cost of not listening. The problems of Ledbury Estate could have been resolved far earlier and much more cheaply if only the residents had been listened to.

We urge Scrutiny not to rush to judgement on the implementation of this report. It should be held in abeyance to allow detailed consideration and discussions to take place. Whilst the authors have been empowered to take it upon themselves to indicate what the Council should implement and what to dismantle it seems to display a degree of researcher arrogance and it is largely unworkable. It is time for us to sit round the table and resolve the issues of how there is an effective voice for tenants and residents. Ignoring and marginalising us has in some instances devastating and costly consequences.

Ian Ritchie  
Vice Chair  
Tenants Council

