

Public Summary of the Resident Involvement Quality Review carried out by the Housing Quality Network, January 2019

Background

In 2017 Southwark Council received a report it had commissioned from Kaizen Partnership making a number of recommendations in relation to resident involvement.

In the council's own words, 'Kaizen noted that the resident involvement structure had changed little since the late 1980s despite huge social and cultural changes in the borough, in the way the housing service is run and in terms of technology and social media. The engagement structure therefore merited a substantial review.'

This process of review was included in the May 2018 governing group's manifesto and in June, 'the Cabinet agreed to review of the engagement structure and its associated assets and given the scale of the change the council committed to create as open and inclusive a process as possible to carry out the review, and one that allowed all residents to have their say.'

The review was carried out by a resident-led Co-design Panel under an independent Chair (Phil Morgan). The council invited nominees from Tenants Council, Homeowners Council, Youth Council and the My Southwark Homeowners Board. Places were also made available for 7 (+ 2 reserves) non-aligned residents, recruited on the basis of applications and selected to be broadly representative of the diversity of the tenant and homeowner population.

In order to progress rapidly to meet deadlines set by the council, TRA secretaries and chairs were directly invited to apply, as were Area Housing Forum delegates. In addition, over 5000 tenants and homeowners were contacted directly by email about joining the Panel, and sent information, and an application form and given a deadline by which to respond. Ninety-eight residents applied and the independent chair invited seven applicants as well as two reserves to join the panel to achieve a balanced group on the basis of gender, location, age, ethnicity and availability. Those who were not selected for the Panel were invited to contribute to the review as members of a Sounding Board.

The Co-design Panel made recommendations based on the evidence provided to it. All residents and their organisations were able to send in their views and suggestions and all the evidence, as well as the reports to and minutes of the Panel's meetings, were published on the council's website.

The Co-design Panel met every 2-3 weeks until mid-December – an extension at the Panel's request, from the original deadline of mid-December. The resulting report was issued for consultation in early January.

The process was boycotted by Tenants Council and Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations

The brief

HQN were asked carry out a qualitative review of the working of LB Southwark's Resident Involvement Review Co-design Panel.

The purpose of the review was to enable the council to learn the lessons from the process to inform future initiatives.

We have carried out the review under the following headings

1. Ownership of the process
2. Recruitment/Composition of the Panel
3. Training/induction/briefing of the Panel
4. Timetable of meetings/reports
5. Meeting themes
6. Timing location of meetings
7. Conduct of meetings
8. Reports to meetings
9. Attendance
10. Transparency/publication of papers
11. Role of Officers
12. Chairing of meetings
13. Sounding Board
14. Quality of the report
15. Overall conclusions

Who I spoke to

- Phil Morgan: The Chair of the panel
- Martin Kovats, Eva Gomez, and John McCormack, Officers of the council
- Five of the Resident panel members met with me at the end of the process (in two meetings) to offer their views

Documents I read

- The Kaizen report
- All papers, minutes, and agendas considered in the eight meetings of the panel
- The final report of the panel subsequently issued for consultation
- Southwark Council updates on the process on review's dedicated website

Meetings I've attended/observed

I observed the eighth and final meeting of the group on December 19th, 2019

Findings and Recommendations

1. Ownership of the process

The council was fully committed and owned the process. It is also clear that those residents who put themselves forward to participate were committed to the concept and, in their feedback, gave credit to the council for taking the initiative to create a co-design process.

However there were problems of ownership and commitment among specific groups, notably Tenants Council and the Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations (SGTO). Tenants Council declined to take up its seat on the panel and SGTO led a campaign to boycott the process.

While the Resident Involvement team's managers were both wholly committed both to the process and to attendance at the panel's meetings, the attendance of some officers was less regular. In future exercises it is important that those who attend are of sufficient seniority.

The relationship between the council and some members of the Tenants Council is widely seen as antagonistic and negative. While other groupings were not actively antagonistic to the process, some officers felt that with more time it would have been beneficial to have explained the background, thinking and context of the review more thoroughly.

Recommendations

- The Council's self-evident ownership and commitment to this process needs to be improved by appropriate levels of attendance and seniority from its own officers.
- For the future, in setting up groups of this sort time should be allowed in the process to ensure all stakeholders with an interest – whether individuals or groups – are fully briefed and have an opportunity to discuss any concerns or issues.

- It is clearly unsatisfactory that the relationship of the council and a representative group, in this case Tenant Council, should be so poor. The council should seek openly to address the problem and adopt a strategy to address it.

2. Recruitment/Composition of the Panel

The recruitment process was wide reaching and considerably broadened the opportunities for those who had not previously participated in such activity to become involved. The selection of members by the independent chair, rather than by council officers, lent credibility to the neutrality of those selected. In the view of the Chair, the selection process resulted in the involvement of 'seven people who clearly had something to offer'

Those who participated might be expected to be complimentary on the selection process. Nevertheless their views are worth quoting. They were 'impressed by Southwark making the effort to involve residents in co-design' and 'it was a good idea. The email was very clear and attracted me to apply' it 'sounded really interesting and the selection process was really good'

However there were criticisms as well.

A difficult relationship between the Homeowners Council representative and My Southwark Home Owner Board didn't help healthy discussion. The commitment to the continued existence of the My Southwark Homeowners Agency and Board could have been made clearer to the panel. Discussions around this point, and around the preference for a single homeowners representative body should have been informed by this.

Originally, the representative of the My Southwark Homeowners Board was the council officer who chaired the Board, rather than a homeowner member. This person stood down after one meeting. A replacement joined the panel but only in time to join the last three meetings.

Recommendations

- The recruitment opportunity offered to wide range of residents is good practice. With more time the opportunity could have been offered through wider publicity to a larger pool.
- Representative bodies should be represented by users, regardless of whether those bodies are chaired or in some other way serviced by council officers
- Any 'non-negotiables' should be made clear from the outset

3. Training/induction/briefing of the Panel

A review of the meeting papers as well as feedback from participants themselves demonstrate that induction was good in the first meeting, which was largely given over to briefing the participants on the background and the issues. The reports were well written and accessible. Furthermore, throughout the process the Chair's briefing for each meeting was particularly well written and easy to read.

However, the flipside of recruiting a number of people who had not previously taken part in such an exercise, and who lack detailed knowledge of the subject under discussion, is that participants start from a low level of knowledge. Participants felt that there was a steep learning curve in absorbing the history, the context, the present arrangements, the future options and the issues, and there was a general view that more time would have been helpful to do so.

A second issue was that, other than some time given over in the first meeting to make introductions, there were no real opportunities for the panel to get to know each other as a team. As a result a number of participants felt that the panel acted more as individuals throughout the series of meetings and never really developed as a group.

Together with some uncertainty about the subjects under discussion, lack of familiarity with each other may well be the reason that all of those interviewed noted that the group were 'quite quiet' for the first 'two or three' meetings. It is possible, although it cannot be said for certain, that the group's lack of familiarity with each other hindered open discussion to a degree, and may well have hindered the chances of reaching a consensus.

This was more a consequence of the tight timetable rather than a lack of awareness on the part of the Chair or officers

Recommendations

- Time should be set aside at the outset of the process to ensure that all participants are fully briefed in preparation for the work of the panel
- Time should also be set aside to enable participants to become acquainted and better able to act as a team through familiarity and being comfortable to express their views in front of each other.

4. Timetable of meetings/reports

Almost all those interviewed said that the timetable was tight and that the process suffered accordingly. Most meetings were fortnightly but three meetings were held in three successive weeks.

While servicing of the meetings was good, the tightness of the timetable meant that papers occasionally went out late and some residents found they were unable to read them, at least in full, in time. Officers felt that this offered no time to reflect and it was very challenging to administer. The extension of the timetable (by a month) showed some flexibility, but not enough.

Recommendations

- The lack of time and the feeling the process was rushed recurs throughout feedback. Sufficient time needs to be allowed to enable full induction at the outset, the opportunity for the team to gel, reflection between meetings, time to prepare, read and digest reports and to avoid untied loose ends at the end of the process.

5. Meeting themes

Laying out the themes in advance was good. Members of the panel knew what was to be discussed and when, so could be assured that, if they had particular areas of interest, they would be covered. A number of participants made reference to the 'excellent structure to the meetings'.

The initial inclusion of the 'use of tenant halls' as a theme jarred although I recognise that the reason for inclusion was that this was intended to be a review of both the 'engagement structure' and 'it's associated assets'. The theme was indeed replaced by 'use of digital means of engagement', whose omission originally was equally surprising given the strong trend in resident engagement to embrace all forms of digital means of communication.

The change of theme however demonstrated flexibility in content.

The 'liveliest meeting' according to several was that attended by Ledbury Residents Association, although one resident described their report on the antagonism they had experienced to have been very disheartening because it reflected one of the barriers to more people getting involved

Recommendations

None

6. Timing and location of meetings

No issues were raised by any interviewees.

Recommendations

None

7. Conduct of meetings

The general consensus that that the tone of meetings had been reflective, positive and focussed on problem solving. The fact that this was a task and finish group with a clear remit helped in giving the participants focus. All struggled with the timetable, as mentioned above.

A number of participants described the first two or three meetings as low key, with members of the group appearing reticent to contribute. A learning point from many, as alluded to earlier, is to create ways in which participants can get to know each other and feel more relaxed/confident in each other's company.

The way the meetings were run meant according to one member, everyone 'had a chance' and the Chair and others did their best to ensure this was a place where it felt 'safe to disagree'.

There was a problem with the behaviour of one panel member. A code of conduct and team ethos was agreed at the first meeting, which included sanctions for 'unacceptable behaviour' including the option to put 'a motion...to the meeting to suspend the person from meetings of the Panel' but this was not invoked. The Chair's view, which is entirely reasonable, was that after a difficult first meeting the individual's attitude improved. The recurrence of difficult

behaviour came towards the end of the process, by which time it felt too late and impolitic to invoke the code.

It seems more likely that had the panel had more time to gel as a group at the outset, peer pressure would have had a more positive impact on moderating behaviour.

The Cabinet Member for Housing Management and Modernisation attended the panel's final meeting. Much of the discussion was centred round whether there should be single strategic resident representative body or separate bodies for tenants and home-owners, or a hybrid. Mixed views were expressed round the table and quite late in the discussion, the Councillor spoke out clearly against 'separate silos', extolling the virtues of a mixed tenure body. This surprised to some of the residents I spoke to, who had understood the Councillor had come to observe. Another resident, however, felt it was the confrontational approach of another panel member which might have 'intimidated some into silence' prevented them coming to consensus, not the expressed views of a member.

There were mixed views on whether the council should have steered the process more explicitly. Some felt they were right to remain neutral. Others felt it would have been helpful to have known the council's standpoint from the start.

Recommendations

- Whatever groups might be established as a consequence of this review, the Code of Conduct, adopted by the group, amended if necessary to meet the particular requirements of the group, needs to be adopted and to applied to all.
- The council should decide at the outset as to whether to express its initial viewpoint or whether to remain silent and await the work of the panel to complete.

8. Reports to meetings

The content of reports was very good: clear, informally written and easy to understand. The Chair's reflective written briefing to each meeting successfully gave context and feedback since the previous meeting, and introduced the agenda.

There was a lot to absorb in the papers in a very short time for people largely new to it. However the problem lay not in the content. It was the 'last minute' nature of despatch on a few occasions that caused difficulties

Recommendations

None

9. Attendance

Average attendance at each meeting was seven out of the thirteen members (or 8 if the attendance of substitutes is included). Five members of the panel attended six meetings or more (there were eight meetings in total). Levels of attendance remained reasonably constant through the course of the process: there doesn't appear therefore to have been a tailing off of interest.

The Youth Council representative only attended one meeting. It might have been better to have discussed with the Youth Council a more appropriate representative with more of a stake in the issues being discussed.

Recommendations

There is a limit to the degree to which volunteers can be obliged to attend meetings. I would suggest that a less intensive schedule such as monthly rather than fortnightly, and at times weekly, meetings might have the effect of improving the figures

It may be helpful for the council briefly to survey those with, say, attendance figures of five meetings or less to establish their reasons for their inability to attend more meetings attendance, to better inform future arrangements.

Council representatives should be at the right level and should attend the majority of meetings. Outside bodies invited to send representatives should be encouraged to commit to the process and send individuals appropriate to the task.

10. Transparency/publication of papers

There was good practice in respect of transparency and availability of papers. Reports, minutes freely available and easily found on Southwark website

Recommendations

None

11. Role of Officers

Amongst officers themselves roles were largely clear but there were some blurred edges. There was 'a bit of a lack of glue' according to one.

There was much praise for the contributions of John McCormack and Eva Gomez. Some felt that more explanation about who was there and why would have been helpful.

For some staff members of the panel there was some ambiguity about their role: were they impartial advisors or full panel members, and whose views were they expressing or 'allowed' to express? This ambiguity should have been addressed by making explicit officers' roles. For future exercises, elected members could take part in a co-design process instead or alongside officers.

Recommendations

- The role of officers on the panel was not clear and this ambiguity should be avoided in future exercises, for example in one of the ways suggested above.

12. Chairing of meetings

By all accounts the meetings were chaired well and the Chair was also actively engaged between meetings. The meeting I attended was chaired well: he was sensitive and sensible and clear in his summarising and steering

Recommendations

None, the appointment of an independent chair was a great strength in the process

13. The Sounding Board and the use of IT

Officers in particular regretted that the use of the Sounding Board – those applicants who applied but were not invited to join the panel - was largely unsuccessful. Very few responses were received to consultations and papers. Officers also were disappointed that IT innovations were unsuccessful. They had wanted to create a community discussion shared drive but ended up simply putting information on the website. This was a shortcoming. 'We simply couldn't get the IT to work – but it's definitely a prize worth fighting for'

Recommendations

- Time should be allowed at the beginning of the process to brief members of the Sounding Board and proactively encourage their involvement, perhaps by having a one-off meeting/presentation to explain background/options and context, together with explaining the means by which participants can input. There might also be an end of process meeting to their response to the recommendations as part of the consultation process.

14. Quality of the report

The report is well written and clear, and the outcomes relate to the brief.

Residents to whom I spoke felt that 'the report has taken us a long way forward' and there was a lot of consensus on the recommendations at a lower level – particularly the 'ring of involvement' There is some disappointment that the panel could not reach agreement on the issue of a single strategic resident body, or otherwise. As the Chair observed there was 'No point forcing a consensus... there was no overt agreement on the strategic overview body.'

Recommendations

None, other than earlier observations about allowing the process more time

15. Overall

Taking the exercise at face value, there is much to commend. There is much good practice to point out. The commissioning of the original Kaizen report, the design of the process, the themed meetings, the selection process, the attempt to cast the net beyond current involved 'residents'. The appointment of an independent chair, and the concept of co-design itself are all impressive. Residents who participated were impressed with many aspects of the exercise.

There were aspects to the consultation, such as the Sounding Board and the shared drive which were less successful, but these two were set up with the best of intentions, and the council is likely to want to persevere with these approaches in future exercises.

There were, however, drawbacks to the process. Overwhelmingly the main issue was the timetable, which all concerned felt was tight. The evidence of the impact on various aspects of the process has been drawn out throughout this report, so I shall not repeat the points.

One member said that 'All in all, there were good intentions – fresh people and so on – in practice didn't quite work. It was too rushed and therefore panel weren't well enough informed' Another said it was a 'great idea to involve residents who had not previously been involved, but they needed more time to get a feel for the history context and options to put forward well informed views'

In summary the model has a lot to commend it. In future however timescales need to be more realistic. Whatever model is utilised it needs to begin with an extended exercise to bring the team together and create familiarity and a bond. One way of proceeding thereafter could be to take a radically different approach of having two or three extended events to complete the project rather than eight two-hour meetings over a series of weeks. For example, approaching the exercise by setting aside two all day, or overnight, away events three or four weeks apart, could prove a more efficient use of time.

With these caveats and with the issues addressed, together with absolute clarity as to the council's approach to taking a view or remaining silent until the review is complete. The model has much to recommend it and should serve as a basis for further work of this kind.

Peter Walters 31/01/19