

Briefing Paper To Environment and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission

Monday 20th February 2023

From Tenants Council Representative, Cris Claridge

“Only by working together can we ensure our housing services work for our residents, our homes are in good condition, our estates are safe, clean and cared for, and our local communities are supported to prosper and thrive.”

This is a quote from Councillor Kieron Williams’ report to Cabinet in February 2020, looking at the Resident Participation Framework. If the Council truly see the value of strong resident participation, their actions do not reflect this.

The Tenants Forum meeting on 11th January looked at rent setting for the next financial year. We were highly concerned by the conduct of this meeting. Instead of influencing decision-making, residents were merely given a presentation on a pre-made decision from the Council. How can you claim to consult with residents when they are not even given a say on basic questions regarding the rent they pay and the services they receive? Comments were ignored and 300 chat points were left unread and unanswered. While the meeting was hosted by the Tenants Forum, Forum members were never given an opportunity to influence the structure of the meeting or the content of the Council’s proposals.

If the Council views itself as an enabler of participation and the residents as the driving force, it has a long way to go to achieve this ambition. We recognise the impact of COVID-19, but the Council cannot continue to use this as an excuse. The Council threw out its previous participation structures during the first few weeks of the Pandemic – this was not communicated effectively to residents, and they were left bewildered and unable to influence policy. Since then, multi-ward Forum meetings have been dominated by officers rather than residents, with agendas set by the Council. When residents are given a driving seat, this is often as a tokenistic gesture. In order to be effective, bodies such as Tenants Forum must be treated as theatres of genuine debate, rather than a place where Council policy is paraded in front of residents who are denied a say. The Environment and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission will soon be shown a presentation on resident participation that neither Tenants Forum nor Homeowners Forum were ever given a chance to scrutinise. This presentation provides a set of bullet point research findings, but the Council’s intentions for resident participation are left unclear. How can residents be expected to work with the Council when we are not informed of the Council’s plans?

Related to this is the Council’s treatment of Southwark’s long-established Tenants Movement. Southwark is unique in that it is home to one of the UK’s last remaining borough-level tenants’ federations – the Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations. Yet this resident-led group, representing TRAs across the borough, is given no formal place in the Council’s consultation structure and is continually threatened with funding

reductions and an ambiguous tendering process. The SGTO's continued pleas for greater clarity over its future are ignored. Instead of enabling participation, the Council are shutting it down.

Even the basic question of where resident participation sits in relation to Council decision-making has become clouded. We have long called for resident participation to be treated as a housing matter, rather than sitting under environment – far removed from the very residents who seek to engage with the Council. Why does the Council refuse to listen to the tenant and resident representatives who it empowers to scrutinise policy?

Tenants Council calls on the Council to revoke the decision to decimate the established and respected tenant participation structure and work with residents on the implementation of its Resident Participation Framework. We too believe that all residents have the right to be heard, and that this right must be taken seriously at all times. The presentation to Scrutiny will highlight the amnesia the Council have experienced on this issue – let us work with the Council to overcome this and deliver for residents.