

Mini-Review of the Residents' Participation Framework

Overview

Southwark Council is the 4th largest social landlord in the country and the largest in London, with over 53,000 council rented, leasehold and freehold homes across the borough that are home to over 100,000 people. As such Southwark has historically been a trailblazer within the Tenants' movement. However, this role comes with considerable additional complexities, challenges and responsibilities to ensure a properly functioning, inclusive and democratic residents' participation structure that is fit for the 21st Century.

The structure in place prior to the 2020 report had survived largely unchanged for approximately 30 years. In that time there had been considerable changes in both the way housing services are delivered and the way that residents tell the council they want to be involved. Best practice advice from the Local Government Association and others recommends that councils review their resident participation arrangements regularly to ensure they work well.

In its surviving form, the Resident Participation Framework was failing to attract new residents to get involved. Some groups of people were particularly underrepresented including young people and families with children. Furthermore, 40% of tenants and leaseholders were excluded from the resident consultation structure altogether, as they lived in council homes which were not covered by a TRA at all. As such they were unable able to elect representatives to Area Housing Forums and, therefore, were not represented at Tenants Councils or elsewhere.

In 2020 a new structure was finalised for introduction with the aim of opening up the Council's approach to resident participation to give everyone living in a council home the opportunity to get involved. However, it appears that not all of the recommended changes were successfully introduced to date, and those that were have of themselves failed to attract significant wider resident involvement. Accordingly there is a fairly universal acknowledgement that the framework needs to be revisited and improved in order for it to achieve its aims.

The 2020 Cabinet Report undertook to carry out a full evaluation after the first year to assess the way the new structure was working and identify further improvements that could be made. Such an evaluation has not been carried out to date and the aim of this review is to provide some pointers and recommendations to move this process forward.

Examples of successful Community Engagement within the Council

Conscious of some significant complexities associated with building a successful and sustainable Resident Participation Framework, the Commission decided to investigate how the Council approaches community engagement in other areas, with a view to exploring how good practice could be replicated across the board.

There is good evidence of successful community engagement methodology and outcome within the council in some areas and the Commission focussed on 2 examples:

1. The [Citizens's Jury](#) established as a deliberative forum comprised of randomly selected residents to focus on a particular policy issue (Climate Change) and respond to a specific question: 'What needs to change in Southwark to tackle the emergency of climate change fairly and effectively for people and nature?'

The Commission heard from the Director of Climate Change and Sustainability about the process deployed to gain an understanding of residents' objectives and priorities in relation to the question posed.

Members of Jury were selected using stratified sampling so that the final profile of the jury reflected local diversity in terms of: age, disability, ethnicity, gender, geography, relative deprivation of an area and attitude to climate change.

The early sessions gave the jury a general overview of the issues and the topic of climate change. The sessions were facilitated to allow jurors to agree guidelines for working together. After initial sessions, they then prioritised the themes they wanted to focus on, and had sessions with experts in these themes.

After this the jury spent time considering what they had learned, and developing a set of recommendations which they voted on to rank in preference.

2. The [We Walworth](#) project established with a goal of mass engagement within a particular geographical area of the borough with the purpose of identifying local priorities and developing new visions for identifying and addressing neighbourhood challenges.

The Commission heard from the Programme Director and a representative of the local partner Pembroke House. Using neighbourhood welcome events with shared food to train local people in engagement (e.g. street and phone canvassing) with the wider community. Through this process, other members of the community became engaged to participate, thus building capacity for further outreach. The project was aimed to engage with 80% of residents in the neighbourhood.

The methods deployed enabled the building of equitable cross-sector teams able to work successfully together. New neighbourhood capacity was created through new skills, connections, relationships and partnerships.

The intention has been that, with time, local people and organisations gain a greater sense of agency and ability to affect change in their local area, having gained new skills to better connect with and therefore serve their communities.

Equally, learning from the project is embedded within organisational structures and shared by participating staff within their teams.

Whilst noting the successes of the We Walworth project, it is important to emphasise that it has been extremely well funded by central government and that certain caveats may apply accordingly.

Learning from successful community engagement experiences

Whilst anecdotally, the We Walworth project was felt to be inclusive and representative of its diverse neighbourhood, there was no evidence that this had been specifically monitored. Nevertheless, the Commission heard that it had been successful in achieving its aim of mass engagement. Meanwhile, a Citizens' Jury, by definition, is not designed for mass participation and so ensuring that it was constituted in such a way as to be truly representative of our diverse borough had been paramount from the outset. Drawing from this experience it is logical to conclude that, whilst mechanisms to embed diversity are crucial to the success, relevance and optimisation of any engagement structure, mass participation helps to facilitate this; conversely, where only a small pool of residents are involved much greater attention needs to be given to ensuring that the pool is truly representative.

The We Walworth project in particular was intended as a replicable model that can be refined for use in local decision making on any issue and in any area.

The Citizens' Jury was developed to give additional breadth of understanding and purpose around a key Council policy area, whilst the We Walworth project focused on developing mass engagement in order to identify and address residents' priorities. A successful resident participation structure needs to do both of these things.

Factors from both projects, which may be considered to have contributed to their success, include the following:

- Adequate resourcing including sufficient officer support from within the Council, combined, where necessary, with external support
- Training within the structure to build capacity and maximise grass roots participation
- Ensuring diversity of participants
- Some kind of reimbursement/remuneration of participants

The Commission heard from the Tenant and Homeowner Involvement Team Leader, about the impact of the new Regulatory Code on participation and the framework. The Regulator is encouraging co-creation as part of the Tenant Empowerment and Involvement Standards which incorporates practices such as resident involvement in landlord communications to residents, as well as recognition and reimbursement for time taken by residents (as per Citizens' Jury and We Walworth example cited earlier).

Updated practices for resident involvement should include in depth research, training for residents to become active citizens, and creative, educational and enjoyable activities, much of which is also part and parcel of the We Walworth project.

The Commission heard from the Resident Involvement Manager who noted that the service has been responsible for some award winning work engaging the community. It was reported that the Housing Quality Network has been invited to look at where we are now and where the participation framework needs to go.

Background to the 2020 changes in the Resident Participation Framework

The Kaizen/Social Engine report commissioned to explore how to update and reinvigorate the resident participation framework found the following:

- 65% of respondents to the questionnaire saying they would like to be more involved
- 56.7% said they knew nothing about the Tenants Council. Young people in particular felt that the formal engagement structures were not accessible to them.
- 64% of respondents said they knew nothing about the Tenants and Homeowners Funds. Respondents expressed a clear preference for spending to be allocated for activities which directly and demonstrably benefit communities, which was not achieved by the wa
- 57% of respondents said they knew nothing about Area Housing Forums.

The above findings are fully consistent with other accounts received by the Commission and Commission chair, including that based on the experience of the Deputy Cabinet Member for Diversity, who commented that she had been engaging with the wider community of residents, including some of those who were not aware of if the previous structures in place.

The Deputy Member for Diversity said that her work with TRA and residents had been focussed on getting a broader demographic of people involved. Through the course of this she had discovered that there were problems with the old system, particularly involving younger people and more diverse ethnicity. These findings and other accounts suggest that the old structure was not successfully fulfilling its purpose.

The Commission learnt that some TRAs and engagement structures do not collect demographic data so the Council does not always know the diversity of resident participation. Additionally, there are areas where language barriers present a considerable obstacle to communication and inclusion.

Despite acknowledged shortcomings, the Kaizen/Social Engine report did draw some sensible conclusions, and the intentions behind the changes in the structure that followed were noble, namely to:

- Ensure everyone living in a council home has the opportunity to participate, with more choice of how and when they can get involved
- Direct more resources and support to the grass roots, so tenants and residents have the support they need to improve their local estates and communities
- Use digital engagement as an additional way to get more people involved
- Ensure residents living in council homes not covered by a TRA can participate, as well as working with tenants and residents to increase the coverage of TRAs
- Continue to include elected representation of tenants and homeowners

- Continue to include local housing forums (keeping them separate from the wider Ward Forums)
- Continue to include separate Southwark wide forums for tenants and for homeowners, alongside a joint forum to consider shared issues
- Ensure residents continue to set the agendas of housing forums so they focus on the issues that matter to them, with forums chaired by residents and with annual work plans set by residents
- Ensure decisions on funding for resident participation are based on recommendations from tenants and residents
- Strengthen the link between tenants & residents and the council's Housing Scrutiny Commission
- Continue to provide independent support and advice for council tenants and homeowners, including from Southwark's independent tenants federation, Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations (SGTO).

The intention was to adopt a truly inclusive and democratic approach to resident participation that allowed everyone living in council accommodation to become involved and to shift the resources that the council puts into resident participation back to the grassroots, giving our residents more support and funding to do the things they want to do to improve their local estates and communities.

Within 2 months of the Cabinet Report being published, the country was in full COVID lockdown and the process of rolling out the changes faltered to other urgent priorities within the council.

Due at least in part to the pandemic, there has been a significant increase in the degree to which residents are able to access council services and processes digitally, as well as to communicate within resident groups via social media. Increased digital inclusion presents additional opportunities for more residents to participate. Crucially, there needs to be a plurality of engagement options rather than a *one size fits all* approach.

The Commission heard from Brandon TRA about work to ensure younger and older people are engaged through activities. The TRA are also providing avenues to meet staff.

The state of play in 2022-23

During the course of conducting the current review it became apparent that there are tensions, if not an impasse, between the areas of the council dealing with council housing and some of the parties currently and historically involved in the tenants' and homeowners' organisations. In recognition of these tensions, and by way of trying to plot a constructive way forward, prior to the open meeting of the Scrutiny Commission on 20th February, the Commission chair sought meetings with officers and residents in order to gain a better understanding of the background. It was felt that this would be the best way of preparing the ground for a meeting focussed on achieving positive outcomes

The Chair regrets that, in general, it did not prove possible to arrange such advance meetings with residents' representatives. Accordingly, much of the 20th February meeting of the Scrutiny Commission was spent listening to accounts of past difficulties, leaving much less time and opportunity for residents and members to suggest or sound out solutions, or explore together improvements that could be achieved.

The SGTO representatives attending the meeting on 20th February acknowledged the efforts made to meet in advance and said that while they had been unable to do this previously they would like to find a time to meet. Such a meeting subsequently took place.

It is a notable observation through this process that discussion of the past is generally rancorous. It cannot be doubted that all parties have a genuine desire to see a resident participation framework which is fit for purpose and that this can only come about through looking forward rather than backwards.

Residents' representatives expressed the view that the Council needs to be an enabler of participation, whilst residents should be the driving force. There have been concerns that meetings have become too officer-led and, rather than being a forum for debate, they have been used to communicate council policy and decisions. A more clearly defined framework that lays out responsibilities of different stakeholders would help to overcome this impasse. Officers have also identified a need to have a corporate vision of the future of the Resident Participation Framework.

There seems to be a general consensus between officers, members and residents giving evidence that it would be helpful to organise a one-day conference of interested parties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1.

The Council should properly explore what can be learnt from the examples of successful engagement and replicated in the Resident Participation Framework. There are processes that are integral to the operation of the Citizens' Jury, the We Walworth project and perhaps other examples of successful community engagement with residents which are transferrable. Many of the practices seen in the We Walworth project in particular are consistent with the new Regulatory Code for social housing and officers should explore and understand how this methodology and lessons learnt can be used in the context of the Resident Participation Framework.

Recommendation 2.

The Council should consider setting up a Citizens' Jury of residents in council housing – i.e. using the selection process employed to select the Citizens' Jury brought together to consider climate change. The use of this model would ensure the selection of a truly representative group of tenants and leaseholders that could consider a variety of matters pertaining to the future development of residents' participation structures, including reimagining and co-designing future development of grass roots

involvement and the wider framework. As with the Citizens' Jury, selected residents would then work with experts to develop a set of recommendations.

Recommendation 3.

Equality and Diversity should be at the heart of the Resident Participation Framework. Budget should be set aside for targeted engagement with diverse communities that have lowest turn outs using diverse providers. The process and the eventual outcome must be underpinned by a firm commitment towards data collection, evidence and impact monitoring.

Recommendation 4

In line with recommendations from central government and existing experience of successful community engagement through the Citizens' Jury and the We Walworth project, the council should adopt a system of incentives such as financial reimbursement/remuneration for residents' time.

Recommendation 5

In accordance with the recommendation in the 2020 Cabinet Report, the Council should carry out a full evaluation of the Resident Participation Framework introduced. This needs to be a properly resourced proactive exercise carried out at a grass roots level in each individual ward/area. Drawing on the We Walworth model, this could involve street/telephone canvassing, drop in sessions, digital fora, workshops.... to bring people to the table. This process must involve all community leaders and groups such as the Southwark Black Parents' Forum, Livesey Exchange, Spring Hub, The Giving Lab, Active Communities Network, Golden Oldies, Elim house, London Seniors, Southwark LGBT Network, Somalia Development Association, Unshackled Duma. This could be facilitated by [Open Communities](#) which currently works with some TRAs.

Recommendation 6

Review and put in place a performance framework for all stakeholders who have a role in delivering the Resident Partnership Framework in order to get clarity on roles and improve coherence and delivery. As part of this process, all organisations/stakeholders within the framework in receipt of or responsible for managing funds should present verifiable accounts. Organisations receiving larger sums should be required to present fully audited accounts. This will ensure that resources are used more efficiently and that functions are neither duplicated nor missed.

Recommendation 7

It is recognised that many tenants do not live on estates and that not all estates have functioning TRAs. Through the course of the above, the Council should consider, at a grass roots level, how best to expand TRAs to estates where there is none, and how best to ensure that residents not living on estates are properly represented.

Recommendation 8

Explore how the growth in digital inclusion can improve engagement and provide further training to residents who remain digitally excluded.

Recommendation 9

Officers should work with residents to ensure that residents are able to influence the process of agenda planning for meetings. Meetings should be minuted and minutes circulated.

Recommendation 10

The following on from this report, the Council should arrange a one day or half day conference of interested parties to discuss and communicate how this process will be taken forward.

Recommendation 11

Residents taking on executive committee/ officer positions in constituent bodies within the Resident Participation Framework should be required to submit a Register of Interests form in which they declare any private interests which may conflict or be perceived to conflict with their public duties.