

APPENDIX 2

Response to Resident Involvement Review Co-Design Panel Report

On 7th February 2017 Tenant Council was invited to speak at the Housing and Community Safety Sub-committee on the subject of Resident Involvement. At the time it was viewed as a welcome, and rare opportunity to make councillors aware of the decline in support and interest of officers in genuinely engaging with residents over matters of housing management.

It is true to say that Resident Involvement, and Community Engagement before, has never been a straight road, and it is very clear the emphasis and effort employed in engaging with tenants and leaseholders is very much driven by the importance placed on it by who leads the housing department and the council itself. Regrettably, one Director who placed little emphasis on consultation and engagement has now been replaced by another who places even less it seems.

The representations made to the Scrutiny panel should have been old news to them. Every councillor on that panel was elected from a ward covered by an Area Housing Forum. All Councillors should have already been aware of the misfiring consultation structure from their attendance at these meetings, but almost on block they have disengaged from the involvement in the consultation structure. This maybe that they see these Forums, castrated as they have been, as having no value in attending, failing to understand that their very presence there makes the meetings more relevant. Every councillor has an open invitation to Tenant Council, and whilst there are one or two councillors that do make an effort to attend with some regularity, it is only one or two, and the overwhelming majority do not.

It was made clear at the meeting of 7th February however, the many barriers that were causing the current system of consultation to fall short of the level and quality of engagement that we would hope for and expect. Only a few short years ago the Director, Head of Housing and the Member for Housing would be expected at every single meeting. They would hear first hand our problems and concerns and they would answer to them. At the time of the meeting it was pointed out that the Director of Housing had not been present for over 2 years and the Cabinet Member for Housing had attended once. Their lack of interest in us, correlates perfectly with the officers' lack of performance in servicing the consultation structure. It was also pointed out that a six weekly cycle of meetings between the Cabinet Member for Housing and the Chair and Vice-Chair of Tenant Council, agree to try to address the increasing concerns with the serving and content of Tenant Council and the resulting effects on consultation, had never materialised.

The idea of a working party of officers, councillors and resident be set up to look into the problems was proposed. We envisaged that we, as 'stakeholders' with a good understanding of the consultation structure, how it should work when working well, and how it was working then, when it wasn't working well, would be a key part of this working party. The prime purpose of having a consultation structure after all is to utilise it for consultation. This was our misunderstanding.

At considerable expense to the Housing Revenue Account, an external organisation was charged with exploring independently and in depth how the council engages with tenants and homeowners as a housing provider and identify areas for improvement. The budget it was set for this work was £46000. The organisation to conduct this research was selected by the very officers mismanaging the current consultation structure, and the brief was set by those self same officers.

The organisation who successfully bid for the project, Kaizen and Social Engine, produced a report presented to the Housing and Community Safety Sub-committee. The report was unremarkable in its finding.

As we had repeatedly identified, the engagement structure was dated. Devised some 30+ years ago, rarely reconfigured as the Council reconfigured its management areas, under resourced, and in a cycle of funding reduction, lacking in staff expertise to embrace new technology and new methods of engagement, staffed increasingly by officers with no knowledge of how the engagement structure should function, and stuck in a mindset where it was easier not to engage with residents than to engage.

Kaizen and Social Engine however chose to focus solely on what was wrong, rather than why it was wrong. Its cursory assessment found:

- A failure to engage diverse residents reflecting the make up of the Borough
- Lack of awareness of structures
- Lack of awareness of funding and outcomes
- Different priorities
- Communication
- Sustainability

With little questioning, scrutiny or consideration of other options, and perhaps with only a limited understanding of the consequences of their decisions, on 6th February 2018 elected members endorsed the recommendations of the report

It was proposed therefore to make changes under three main headings:

1. Reviewing current approach
2. Reconfigure engagement structures
3. Introduce more modern and up to date involvement mechanisms

Scrutiny determined that a collaborative co-design process should be established in which the council would be a participant alongside residents. This approach was recommended to develop a shared plan for change in response to the review, which would be owned by all stakeholders and build on the alleged widespread participation achieved during the review itself. This approach would potentially have worked, but this is not what we got.

Slowly but surely the Kaizen and Social Enterprise report seemed to grow and take on a life of its own. In July 2017, Councillor Cryan took a paper to cabinet referencing the report which the report stated that it, *'also identified opportunities for improvements in outcomes for residents and the borough as a whole that may be realised by transforming the way resident involvement takes place'*. In actual fact it

didn't. What it did was draw some very basic conclusions from non-depth conversations with people, whilst omitted to make any reference to the potential causes of these problems. This is a clear example of a process being built on disinformation. Throughout, the narrative has been entirely different to the reality.

The report went on to further detail that the Kaizen Social Enterprise report, '*... found several challenges with weaknesses identified throughout and across the current structure and culture of resident involvement, with a need to fundamentally refresh the meaning, purpose and approach to engagement*'. Again, it did nothing of the sort. It identified a number of areas, where there could, and should be some improvement, almost all, if not all of which, could be addressed through improved staff training and more positive input from senior management.

The formation of the co-design panel was agreed by cabinet and yet further money was found from the cash strapped Housing Department's budgets to employ the services for an independent Chair. In reality, the co-design panel, was nothing more than an officer selected working party, and it is shocking that an 'independent' Chair allowed himself to be part of a process that was entirely partisan. It is disturbing that officers do not know the difference and elected members, who should maintain a scrutiny role, chose not to do so.

Officers determined, based seemingly on no input from either Cabinet or Scrutiny, and certainly no input from the recognised consultation structure, that the officer selected working group should comprise 1 Representative from Homeowners Council, 1 Representative from the My Southwark Homeowners Board, 1 (Tenant) representative from the Youth Council, 7 Residents with little or no previous experience of formally participating, in the involvement structure (5 Tenants and 2 Homeowners), 1 Officer from the Communities Division, 1 Officer from Resident Services and 1 Officer from Organisational Transformation.

The lack of tenants familiar with the current engagement structure permitted officers to present a distorted and damning picture of the current consultation structure. From the outset, both how the consultation structure is funded was incorrectly explained to delegates of the working party, and the Tenant Fund was misrepresented.

The opening report to delegates stated, '*There are obvious gaps where there is no TRA, or where a TRA is ineffective resulting in over 80% of tenants being disenfranchised. There are estimates that only 0.5% of the resident population are involved in this structure*'. It failed to make clear that this represented a failure by engagement officers in their function to maintain existing T&RAs and to support and encourage the formation of new Associations. There was no evidence to support the suggestion that only 0.5% of the residents are involved in the structure, and as Southwark has no way to collate such a figure, we can assume that it is entirely false, and its presentation as fact was intended to colour the view of those attending the meeting. It is disappointing, and yet unsurprising that the Chair did not at the time seek some clarification on this.

Interestingly, the GLA held a meeting on 3rd July 2018 discussing issues around Resident involvement in Social Housing, which was attended by various directors of housing departments across London, Southwark's Director of Housing and

Modernisation, was in attendance and having heard a number of his fellow directors proudly extolling the virtues of their tenants and residents associations, their engagement structures, some not dissimilar to our own, commenting on how much they value the contribution of volunteers who strive to make their structures work, Southwark's director took an absolutely different approach, instead preferring to highlight the weaknesses he perceived in Southwark's engagement structure, perversely missing the most obvious, including that of poor leadership. It is very clear from his statement to the committee that he viewed the engagement structure in Southwark outdated, indicating he warmed more to newer methodologies like street stores, digital engagement, and Talkaoke. He also stated, *'We think that only about 0.5% of the Council's tenants and homeowners actively participate in those traditional TRAs and the forums that we have.'*, with nothing whatsoever to support this assertion, and having never had any direct contact with the consultation structure himself.

Whilst councillors may find it acceptable for the director or the housing department to operate like an absentee landlord, it is not considered acceptable by those of us who pay his salary.

In relation to the boycott by Tenant Council of the working party, delegates were informed, *"Panel members should note that both the Tenants Council (who were offered a seat on the Panel) and Southwark Group of Tenant Organisations have boycotted the Review. Whilst accepting that the current arrangements are ineffective, they believe that the review is about silencing voices, that they are not being engaged or consulted about the review, are critical of the Kaizen Review and believe the current arrangements are best practice and represent value for money."*

This again is utterly untrue. It represents the exact opposite of the view that was taken. The current arrangements for consultation are shameful. This has been made crystal clear again and again. Representations were made to Scrutiny on this very issue which prompted them to commence the current review and are a matter of public record. The Chair of the working party must have had access to minutes of Scrutiny meetings where this was discussed as part of his background papers for the project. He must have been aware that Tenant Council was anything but of the view that the current arrangements are either best practice or represent value for money.

Whilst claiming to be a co-design panel, officers laid down very clearly who would be on the working party, what would be discussed, when it would be discussed and provided all the background information and discussion materials. There was not even the merest hint of 'co-design' from start to finish. If elected members at Scrutiny who instructed that a co-design panel be set up, and the issuing of that instruction implies at least some understanding, we need some explanation as to why this did not happen and why elected members failed to act when their wishes were ignored.

The entire process leading to the production of the report paints a picture that mirrors our experiences in the months and years leading up to the report being commissioned. Poor oversight of officers' actions by elected members who have become more aloof and separated from residents. Officers with very fixed ideas about the outcome of the consultation exercise crudely steered delegates towards the outcomes they wanted, providing 'evidence' to support this which was at best subjective, at worse, entirely

untrue. Consultation entered into with the outcome pre-determined as evidenced by correspondence provided by officers prior to the commencement of the working group

It is little wonder therefore that delegates, presented with a damning critique of the current structure opted for a new model. I have no doubt that the residents who gave their time to engage with Southwark over many meetings to produce the report did so with the best of intentions unaware of the dishonest intent that simmered beneath.

This borough had a model of engagement that was viewed as best practice up and down the country until the very recent past, this was never made clear to working party delegates. They were not given the opportunity to look at what had changed or why things have drifted as badly as they had. They were dragged through a process that only ever had one clear outcome - to entirely dismantled the current consultation structure, and for all the elected members and senior officers who have pored over the content of the minutes of the working party minutes, and many surely have, no one, but no one, raised their head above the parapet to say that resident delegates were being provided with a distorted view.

It is disappointing that the Director of Housing and Modernisation when invited to the GLA to hear his peers from other boroughs talking so favourably about engagement in their own areas, set up very similarly to the structure in this borough, that he did not question why it worked well elsewhere but was failing here.

It is unsurprising in many respects that at a time when Southwark is pushing more and more services onto the internet that the outcome of this exercise should be that consultation should be moved in that direction.

It is surprising though that there was no evidence on the minutes of the viability of such a move. BT supported research into digital exclusion by the Good Things Foundation & Professor Simeon Yates in 2017. It reported that 49.5% of those in the DE social classes (using the NRS Social Grade classification system) were digitally excluded, 44.5% of households with an annual income under £11,500, and a further 17.8% with an income under £17800, 47.7% of non-users have a disability or a long standing health issue, 78.3% of non-users left education at aged 16 or under.

Age also plays an enormous part in digital exclusion, 64.4% of non-users are aged 65 or over: 25.3% aged 65-74; and 39.1% aged over 75.

Any comprehensive assessment of the viability of moving focus from face to face engagement to digital platforms, to be relevant would need to incorporate a good understanding of those such a move would disenfranchise. It appears no such assessment was undertaken or even considered as part of the working group deliberations, and the Digital Inclusion enjoyed by the working group is unlikely to be mirrored across the tenant population in Southwark based on the BT sponsored research and many other similar studies.

Moving to the report itself, it seems the council has spent a small fortune producing a report that contains a new 'vision' that in many places simply re-invents the wheel and looks exactly like the old one it is supposed to replace. Arguably the biggest failing

on the consultation structure today, is the abject failure of those officers managing the structure to actually know how it is supposed to function. The current model is an intricate system of timed meetings which ensure a flow of information and down the structure, providing a blanket of consultation and engagement across the borough. The utter chaos, disarrange and lack of experience within the Resident Involvement department, brought about by restructuring and staff changes has crippled the mechanisms for consultation, and instead of looking at the obvious, Southwark has sought to find complex answers instead, and done so at great expense.

The first two paragraphs provide a list of attributes, desirable in the new consultation structure. All good. However, they should have all been present in the existing structure, but they aren't. Many of these should of course go without saying. Where did they go? The report mentions accountability as a value it should adopt. Southwark needs to explain, to account for, what happened to accountability, what happened to transparency, mutual respect, integrity, putting residents first, collaboration, communication. Are we genuinely to believe that all of these values now lacking in the current structure, will be reintroduced under the new structure and be maintained any longer that remains convenient?

There is a proposal that they Council provides annual meetings for those not covered by a T&RA. More opportunities to engage are positive, but the function of a single annual meeting for those not aligned Tenants and Residents Association, can only, by virtue of frequency, be entirely different from the current network of consultation meetings that take place for those residents aligned to Tenants and Residents Associations. The six weekly frequency of Area Housing Forums (AHFs) and Tenant Council currently proves a challenge for many officers obliged to carry out consultation with residents. These meetings would have little value, if in fact any value at all, in a consultation structure. Their value would be as a vehicle for engagement rather than consultation. Reverting back to the old practice of supporting Tenants and Residents Association in difficulty and encouraging the formation of new Associations in areas of poor coverage would better serve the needs of those wanting to be involved in consultation.

A decision would then need to be made as to which budget these meetings were supported by. Should these meeting prove only to be an opportunity for residents to raise disrepair issues and complaints relating to housing management functions. These meetings would need to be funded through an alternative, appropriate budget.

Much is made of a 'red button approach', which clearly slipped past the jargon filter. It has been custom and practice for as long as any of us can remember, that if there is a pressing matter that needs urgent attention that raised by any resident attendee at a meeting, and officer, be that a Resident Services Officer, a Resident Services Manager, or a Senior Officer from Housing Management, will take details of that issue and deal with it as necessary. There is no recognition in the report that this is something that already happens, and this once again attests to the lack of experience of the officer group on the working party.

The report states *'that the model constitution for TRAs should be revisited to reduce jargon and the bureaucracy involved for TRA officers through a co-design*

process.'. Tenants and Residents Associations, the owners of those constitutions, seem to understand them perfectly well, and for by far the most part manage themselves within the boundaries of these constitutions. This seems like change for the sake of change.

The report further states that *'the council should continue to support TRAs being set up where this is wanted by residents'*. Residents will better understand the benefits of forming a Tenants and Residents Association and elect to form an Association, if they are informed of the benefits of doing so and motivated to do so. Historically this was a role undertaken by Community Engagement and Resident Involvement officers. The report makes no mention of this role continuing, but seems to suggest officers will now adopt a reactive rather than proactive role. It is disappointing that the drive to dismantle the current structures extends this far.

The report's suggestions regarding Area Housing Forums, is where the inexperience and lack of knowledge of those involved in the review has really come to the fore. Minutes of the working group meetings indicate that delegates were confined to a number of predetermined options; retain current structure; merge the Area Housing Forums into the Community Councils; create a sub-committee for housing as part of the Community Councils; remove support from Area Housing Forums and not put in place any mechanism below Borough level.

Each option was provided with a short summary of the pros and cons, with retention of the existing forums described in such damning terms that no one would consider retaining them. At no point it seems were the true problems with Area Housing Forums discussed or explained to delegates. Ownership of the failure of Area Housing Forums lies squarely at the feet of senior management, who have failed to ensure the necessary oversight to maintain the flow of items to agendas and who have failed to ensure staff are suitably trained to maintain a working consultation structure. How were delegates ever to make informed decisions when key information was withheld in this way?

Area Housing Forums once a vital conduit between Housing Management, tenants and leaseholders enabling the Council to garner views and opinions of communities across the borough have been all but destroyed by shoddy management and servicing. Officers across the Council are oblivious to their obligation to utilise this channel and those servicing this conduit are seemingly in the dark about its function and purpose.

The solution recommended by the report is one that would all but remove the value the Forums have in the consultation structure, moving the frequency of meetings from 6 weekly to 3 monthly. Knowing the difficulty of funneling reports through the current system, introducing further extended periods between meetings would render them all but useless.

Replacing the delegates system with attendance by individuals removes a democratic system in favour of one that promotes self interest.

Larger meetings require those attending to travel further, hampering involvement and discouraging attendance

The report make reference to strategic bodies, 'selected' by unknown means, selected by persons unknown. That would appear to be a contradiction of para 2(b). Transparency, this is open-ended in the extreme and can be interpreted as meaning anything.

Again, in language that is not entirely clear, the panel appear to be recommending misappropriating the funding tenants currently pay towards the tenant and subsuming it into other budgets. The Chair of the working group, Phil Morgan, was clear to delegates to Tenant Council that neither he, nor working party delegates, had sighted any documentation relating to the formation or the status of the Tenant Fund, but nonetheless did not hold back in recommending an alternative use for it. With the time and the money that has been expended on conducting this review, it is again disappointing that this was not better researched, and again emphasises that the outcome was predetermined.

The panel have agreed three pilot projects for digital involvement, which will exclude the 47.7% of internet non-users have a disability or long standing health issues, the 49.5% of internet non-users are in DE social class, the 44.5% of internet non-users have an annual household income less than £11,500, 78.3% of internet non-users who left education at aged 16 or under, and the 64.4% of internet non-users are aged 65 or over. It is not the function of the review panel to agree changes to the delivery of housing services in this way without due consultation. The council here appears to be in breach of its obligation to consult.

Residents on the working party were fed bias and misleading account of the current consultation structure, by officers with little or no understanding of how the structure should work. It is flawed from beginning to end.

We are, and have always been, happy to work together to improve consultation and engagement across the borough, to be more inclusive, to be more accessible, to embrace new methodologies where appropriate, to review and refine what we have.

We utterly reject the Resident Involvement Review Co-Design Panel Report. It is a flawed document from beginning to end.

Steve Hedger
Chair, Southwark Tenant Council