

Meeting: Housing & Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission	Title: Update on Implementation of Resident Participation proposals
Date: 28 January 2021	From: Director of Communities, Resident Involvement Manager

1. Background

- 1.1 In February 2020, Cabinet passed proposals for reform of the council's long-standing resident participation structures. The reforms proposed aimed to ensure a more inclusive and collaborative culture of resident participation. Amongst other things, this was to be achieved by developing structures that have innovation and flexibility as two of their organising principles.
- 1.2 The proposals passed by Cabinet in February 2020 were due to be implemented from April of this year. However, the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic in spring – and, in particular, the lockdown that commenced towards the end of March – inevitably resulted in delays to implementation. Initially it was anticipated that within a few months there would be a return to 'normal', and the structures, as planned, would be implemented as originally envisaged. This, however, proved not to be the case.
- 1.3 Implementation of the Cabinet proposals commenced in July 2020, with the first round of Local Housing Forum meetings, held online via Zoom. This paper contains further details regarding implementation of the Cabinet's proposals for resident participation.

2. Key points for consideration

- 2.1 The pandemic has had a mixed impact on grassroots tenant organisations (Tenant and Resident Associations - TRAs). Officers from the Tenant and Homeowner Involvement Team have undertaken regular ring-arounds to check on the well-being of the borough's TRAs, and to assess the 'appetite' for TRA activities in an online context.
- 2.2 With the passage of time, more and more TRAs have adapted to using such technology for the purposes of engaging in resident participation activities. The council's Tenant and Homeowner Involvement Team produced guidance for TRAs on the use of Zoom for the purpose of staging meetings, and is currently working on guidance for the use of conference-calling facilities for those residents that do not have access to the internet. In addition, the borough has seen the creation of what appears to be its first digital-by-default TRA: Pynfolds TRA emerged in an exclusively online environment, in response to the Coronavirus pandemic.

2.3 In spite of the challenges confronting the council, TRAs and residents in the current public health climate, most elements of the new resident participation structure are progressing well:

- A total of 18 virtual meetings and events, in the last six months since launch, including 3 rounds of Local Housing Forums.
- The online panel launched in August 2020 and has some 530 members with a demographic largely representative of our resident population. Panel members, have so far had the opportunity to get involved in a wide variety of activities for example feedback on housing investment priorities, helping us improve how we present service charges and rent setting webinar and consultation to name a few.
- The Getting Involved Grants were launched in September 2020 with 17 projects being funded.
- Elections have taken place to the new strategic bodies and Local Housing Forums chairs.
- An Independent Tenant Advisor has been selected by a joint staff-resident panel to help embed the new strategic bodies, and equip them with the skills to function effectively as critical friends of the council.
- A collaboration with SGTO to deliver additional funds to TRAs to carry out Christmas related activity.

2.4 There have been many encouraging comments shared by participants:

- *“It felt like a forum where anybody could ask questions no matter how simple, we could voice concerns, the use of tech was great as I was able to still be at work and get involved.”*
- *“It was an excellent meeting. Well organised and well chaired. No time wasting”*
- *“I think these zoom meetings are brilliant. This is the very first meeting I have been too thanks to zoom. I hope this is the way forward”*
- *“I thought the surveys were helpful and the team was very responsive to chat.”*
- *“I think you should you should keep the online zoom going - even if you end up with a hybrid of both online and offline. I was in another meeting tonight but thanks to this format I was able to attend both meetings. Great presentations I am glad I came. Thank you all”*
- *“Thank you LBS Officers tonight for very interesting and important info as to Income and Expenditure running a local council!”*
- *“Thank you Officers for doing this consultation it most definitely the way to building better relations all around. Thank you all.”*
- *“Thank you to you & the team. Interesting & helpful”*

2.5 There have also been other comments that we have taken on board in order to improve the meetings:

- *“It was disappointing to see the autocratic decision to restrict discussions to chat contributions.”* Everyone is now able to speak and ask questions at the meetings.
- *“It was a presentation and not a forum.”* Meetings are now more interactive, residents are allowed to ask questions and suggest topics for

future meetings. The latter point will be further developed now that we have a resident chair for each of the forums.

- *“Springing any vote or poll without prior notice is poor form.”* Presentations and slides are published in advance of the meetings.
- *“It is useful to know in the participants who is an official of some sort - can all council attendees indicate so in their names next time.”* This is now done at every meeting.
- *“More time for questions, and proper responses, within reason and constraints of time.”* Each item now has Q and A time allocation
- *“Polls done outside of meeting and maybe results presented back”* We are running polls and consultations outside of the meetings too.
- *“The attendance was low and the publicity didn’t seem to be wide enough.”* We have been working with comms to try out new ways to publicise the meetings such as the NextDoor app. In the new year, a leaflet promoting the new resident participation offer has been posted with the rent statements this month and will go out with the service charge statements next month.
- In addition people who have no access to the internet will be able to join the Zoom meetings via ringing a land line.

2.6 The move to an online-only resident participation environment has presented challenges to the council, in terms of capacity to deliver services in such an environment. In particular, the Tenant and Homeowner Involvement Team has undertaken a massive learning curve, in order to facilitate the Local Housing Forums effectively. Whilst significant progress has been made in this respect, including the rollout of SMART laptops, front-line resident participation staff are nevertheless aware of the level and range of skills required to effectively facilitate engaging online meetings. Some valuable training has been undertaken already by officers in this respect, through the Performance and Learning Institute. More training will be required in order to further progress in this respect. In addition, officers from other service areas across the council engaging with residents online would benefit from at least a basic level of training in facilitating effective online meetings.

3. Next Steps

3.1 Next steps include:

- Work is in progress on identifying areas without TRAs and a strategy is being developed on creating new TRAs – despite the current public health challenges a number of new TRAs have already been created.
- A co-design panel is being established on the support offer to TRAs and is due to complete in the spring. Once this completes a review of the training offer will take place.
- Establishment, following elections of the new joint Tenant & Homeowner Forum now elections have taken place to the Tenant Forum and Homeowner Forum.

- Nomination of scrutiny representatives from the new Tenants Forum, Homeowners Forum and Southwark TMO Committee.
- Annual residents housing conference to take place in 2021/22 (this might still have to be in virtual form).
- Analysis and interpretation of all the anonymised data gathered to date in terms of registrations, attendance and online panel membership to feed into further service development.
- Explore and define ways to incorporate the values developed under the Southwark Stands Together into the Resident Participation framework.
- Full review of the new Resident Participation Structures to take place in July 2021 with report back to council's cabinet in the autumn.