

# The Resident Involvement Review: November Update

The council is undertaking a full review of its Resident Involvement structures i.e. how it engages with and supports Southwark's tenants and homeowners to scrutinise housing services, build local communities and have their say. Looking at how things can be done differently has raised some concerns about whether any changes will be for the better or for the worse, and there has also been some misinformation circulating about the Review. This note provides an update on the progress of the Review, sets out the ideas being discussed by the Co-Design Panel and explains how the council will work with residents and their representatives on possible changes in the months ahead.

## **Why review?**

With the exception of special bodies for the growing number of homeowners living in LBS properties, the resident involvement structure of Tenants and Residents Associations (TRAs), Area Housing Forums (AHFs) and Tenants Council has changed little over the last 30 years. Yet, in that time, housing services have been centralised (no more neighbourhood offices) and great changes have taken place in society and in technology for connecting people and communicating information.

While our TRAs do a good job of bringing people together to improve the places they live in, many thousands of tenants and homeowners are excluded from the current structure as there is no functioning TRA where they live. There are a lot of evening meetings and many TRAs tell us how difficult it can be to get new residents involved. There is low awareness of what Area Housing Forums and Tenants and Homeowner councils do and very few people have even heard of the Tenants Fund.

In addition to enabling all residents to have their say, the council itself needs effective resident involvement. The Grenfell Tower disaster underlined how vital it is for Southwark, as the largest council landlord in London, to provide the right ways by which residents can raise their concerns about the housing service and have these addressed. The council also has to prove to the Social Housing Regulator that it allows residents to comment meaningfully on its performance. For all these reasons, the council is working with residents to develop the best system that allows the widest range of our residents to get involved and have their say.

## **What is the Review?**

The Resident Involvement Review began back in 2017 when the council's Housing and Communities Scrutiny Sub Committee commissioned an independent study of the housing engagement structure. This was carried out by Kaizen Social Engine and included surveys, interviews and focus groups involving more than 1000 residents. On completion of the research, in February 2018, the Housing and Communities Scrutiny Sub Committee asked council staff to prepare proposals for the Cabinet on how residents would be involved in this important work. Following the local elections in May, the Cabinet agreed the establishment of a Co-design Panel to take forward a manifesto commitment to 'Work with tenants, residents and homeowner groups to find new ways to engage so that more people can have their say'.

The Co-design Panel was set up in August this year. The Panel is chaired by an independent expert and composed of 3 council officers, a nominee each from Tenants Council, Homeowners Council, the MySouthwark Homeowners Board and Youth Council. In addition, there are 7 non-affiliated tenants and homeowners who were selected following an application process. TRA Chairs and Secretaries and Area Housing Forum delegates were invited to apply, as well as over 5000 tenants and homeowners contacted through MySouthwark. The Panel members were chosen based on their applications, availability and representativeness in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and where they live in the borough. As such, the Panel combines both experience and fresh eyes so that it can make recommendations that work for all residents. The 90 applicants who were not selected are taking part in the process as a Sounding Board, reviewing and commenting on the Panel's discussions and draft recommendations.

The Panel operates in an open and inclusive way. It considers evidence papers, which are published on the Review's webpage, as well as verbal evidence from those who want to contribute to its work. All TRAs and AHFs have been invited to provide information about their experiences of resident involvement. The minutes of each Panel meeting are published online and the Review's webpage has a Contact Us button to allow any resident to send in their thoughts.

## **What has the Co-design Panel been looking at?**

### *Vision and Values*

The Co-design Panel will hold seven meetings. The first of these agreed its operating methods and agenda, and considered the research about how the resident involvement structure works.

The second meeting discussed the purpose of resident involvement and the values that should underpin its structure. The Panel agreed the aim of Southwark's resident involvement:

To create empowered communities and treat residents with respect and as customers

and that the values guiding its structures and processes should include:

- A range of different ways for residents to be involved
- That the council should be transparent, honest and show integrity when working with residents, empower residents and put people first
- Accountability for all in positions of responsibility
- Reflecting the diversity of the resident population, reaching out to all residents
- That the council should ensure value for money, communicate successfully and collaborate with residents to find positive solutions
- That the impact of involvement should be measured and reported openly

### *TRAs and AHFs*

At its third meeting, the Co-design Panel looked at TRAs and Area Housing Forums. It acknowledged the great work TRAs can do and recommended that the model TRA constitution be made easier to use. It thought that while TRAs are very valuable and important, there should also be a wider base especially in areas where TRAs don't exist. The Panel has proposed that the council organise an annual meeting in areas with no TRA so that those residents can also have their say about how their homes are managed and maintained.

The Panel felt that the Area Housing Forums were based around areas for housing management that no longer exist and should be replaced by a smaller number of housing networks aligned with actual housing management areas. These Forums would be open to all council tenants and homeowners in their respective area. They should have a clearly defined role and agenda, allow for local level resident scrutiny of the housing service, community networking and information sharing, as well as provide a mechanism by which residents can escalate systemic concerns.

### *Strategic Resident Involvement*

The fourth meeting considered resident involvement at the borough-wide level. The Panel identified a number of areas for strategic resident involvement: Value for Money, Major Works planning, Consultation, Communication, Performance (including Satisfaction), Resident scrutiny Regulatory compliance and Revising and creating new housing policies. Furthermore, these matters should be addressed through a wider range of ways to be involved including: Co-design

processes, Task and Finish groups, Conference planning, Digital involvement, Resident inspectors, Surveys and Consultation.

The Panel considered that, alongside the above approaches, there could be a strategic body for tenants and one for homeowners, while ensuring that there is: accountability, elections, clarity of membership, time limits on membership, an effective code of conduct, robust governance, annual reviews and that tenants and homeowners views are included in discussion and decision making.

### *Funds and Technology*

At its fifth meeting, the Panel considered the almost £1m a year Resident Involvement funding. The Panel felt that these resources could be divided into those directed towards the grass roots i.e. supporting TRAs, and borough-wide issues, such as conferences and the commissioning of independent advice for tenants and homeowners. The sixth session of the Panel looked at the opportunities and challenges in making much better use of IT and communication technologies, both to enable residents to engage with the council, but also to empower resident groups to connect with their residents.

### **Next Steps**

The Panel has asked for extra time to consider all the issues fully before it produces its final report in December. This will be published online and sent to all TRAs, AHFs, Tenants Council, Homeowner Council, the MySouthwark Homeowners Board and SGTO for comment. The feedback will inform a report scheduled to be considered by the Cabinet in early 2019.

Following the Cabinet's decision, the council will consult with residents and resident organisations across the borough about the best way to implement the recommendations so that there can be as wide as possible, informed discussion of options before any final decisions are made.

<https://www.southwark.gov.uk/housing/housing-community-involvement/resident-involvement-review-co-design-project>