



London Housing Panel

London Tenants Federation (LTF): Tenant federations supporting communities

Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations

Borough-wide and housing association-wide tenants' federations can really come to the fore: by uniting TRAs across a landlord or local authority area to share resources, information, and moral support. Unfortunately, almost all have lost their funding over the past fifteen years, as landlords seek to cut costs and favour more one-to-one consumer-style approaches to engaging with tenants.

Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations (SGTO) is exceptional in that they are one of the last independent borough-wide tenants' federations in London still to be funded and hire staff, yet they have risen to the challenge of Covid-19 with outstanding local knowledge and foresight.

Here are three ways SGTO have stepped up to support communities in Southwark:

1. *Connecting mutual aid groups to TRAs*

In London, tens of thousands of fit and ready furloughed workers have joined a mutual aid revolution, forming groups across the capital, all seeking to help neighbours who need it. But are they able and equipped to reach those most in need?

“SGTO have been forming links with mutual aid groups in Southwark, connecting them to TRAs who appreciate an extra hand and helping them to develop safeguarding policies so they are able to help in a safe and sustainable way.”

2. *Ensuring TRAs have the resources they need to help*

Local authorities are setting up virtual community hubs to work with community groups to help people who are vulnerable. In Southwark, as elsewhere, staff whose normal jobs are for now on ice have been re-apportioned to run support lines, assessing people for vulnerability and getting food and prescriptions delivered. Some TRAs have been helping by taking bulk food deliveries from the council and voluntary organisations, to share with neighbours.

“That’s the beauty of the TRA world,” says Rhiannon. “It feels better for it to be framed as sharing rather than receiving charity. The support is open to everyone.

The TRA’s attitude is: This is what we have, we’re here to share.”



To ensure TRAs can manage this new responsibility safely and sustainably, SGTO have been contacting tenant reps to find out what resources they need. “We’re thinking about practical things like personal protective equipment but we’re also thinking about the less visible things: self-care and mental health. What can we put in place or recommend to make sure neighbours don’t burn out.”

3. *Sharing ‘new’ ideas to keep people involved and reach vulnerable neighbours*

SGTO held social media training earlier in the year, a move that will mean more TRA reps will be better equipped to use apps like WhatsApp to keep in touch with one another, or websites like Twitter to hold their landlords and councillors to account.

But lots of tenants rely on traditional media and modes of communication; radio, TV, newspapers and phone calls. Some do not have the internet at all. How do we reach out to, and include, these neighbours when public meetings and knocking on doors are both off the cards?

“We’ve found too that older tenant reps have seen crises like this before and had the answer at their fingertips: a phone tree,” said Rhiannon. “Everyone’s allocated numbers and they phone people daily or every few days.”

Another analogue solution? Local radio. “We’ve been doing weekly interviews with the Southwark cabinet member for Housing,” says Rhiannon. “We put a shout out to tenants for questions they want answers to. Then we’ve been putting those questions to him in a 30-minute Zoom interview, which we record and send to the local FM radio. Loads of people aren’t online, so it’s reaching them – and there’s a [podcast](#) for those who are.”

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Questions have evolved each week, beginning with lots of queries about the eviction ban, with some now looking ahead and asking how Southwark will help the temporarily housed homeless people once the lockdown is lifted.