

Homeowners Services Improvement Plan 2020-2022



Foreword

Owning your own home, with all the freedoms, rights and responsibilities that brings, is a precious and respected option for many people in Southwark. The council wants to make sure that homeowners who pay a service charge to the council, whether as leaseholder or freeholder, can say that they get a good service for a fair price.

The reasons homeowners choose to buy a council property are many: for some it is their family home they have rented for many years and the RTB discount provides an incentive into ownership; many homeowners were never council tenants and bought a relatively low to moderately-priced council property as a way of getting onto the property ladder or of affording a location otherwise out of their reach; for others, a council home is an investment opportunity that provides a rental income; and there will be many other similar and different reasons homeowners have chosen their path. Whatever the reason people own a home in a council building their rights and responsibilities should be clear from the outset and throughout their time with Southwark.

What we are trying to achieve through this improvement plan is

- A) a good level of service built on the right understanding of the lease, accurate and timely information and a culture of respect and commitment to service on the part of the council
- B) Clear, timely, accurate and helpful communication about all activities that affect leaseholders and for which there will be a bill. This involves listening and responding as well as explaining
- C) Robust management and procurement processes that ensure maintenance, repairs and major works are undertaken as necessary in an efficient and good value-for-money manner, and in a way that keeps homeowners (or their tenants) safe and comfortable in their homes.

Taken together, these aims should ensure transparency for homeowners, flexibility and fairness to pay charges due, and a voice that is listened to and can influence and improve how the council organises and delivers housing related services.

In 2018 Southwark commissioned an independent research company to run a series of focus groups with homeowners from Southwark which were held in August 2018. This was followed up in January 2019 when the former MSHO board commissioned the Housing Quality Network to conduct an independent assessment of how Southwark delivers services to homeowners. Reviewing the outcomes of both these pieces of work led to a cross departmental homeowner's improvement board being established in mid-2019.

The homeowners' services improvement board has representation from all relevant council services, focusing on working collaboratively to improve services that directly and indirectly impact on homeowners. It is also linked to other projects such as the Great Estates and the development of our new asset management strategy (our long term plans to maintain, repair and improve council housing).

Benchmarking with other social landlords has demonstrated that Southwark's improvement plan is ambitious and no other social landlord has one in place. It will be for homeowners to judge whether the plan leads to improvement and we'll be listening with interest and to learn what more can be done.

Michael Scorer
Strategic director of housing and modernisation

Progress update

Our plan currently has a total of 49 low medium and high impact projects covering the following areas based on feedback from home owners, councillors and officers:

- Living environment
- Day to day repairs and maintenance
- Major works
- District heating
- Service charge billing and collection
- Communication, Digitalisation, Accessibility & Engagement

The projects that have been completed to date have largely been straightforward commitments as shown below and steady progress is being made however some of the higher impact projects will take between 12 – 24 months to complete. As of October 2021 we have :

- 24 projects completed
- 22 projects in progress
- 3 projects not started
- 1 project aborted
- 6 projects to be explored at a later date

Home Owners Improvement Plan Projects We Have Delivered

Projects completed between March 2020 and September 2021:

- Our cleaning and grounds maintenance cleaning supervisors all now have annual targets that are monitored to make sure they attend estate inspections with residents to monitor the standards on our estates.
- Based on home owner feedback we have provided information on our homeowners' webpage about the support Southwark provides and who to contact regarding rough sleepers.
- Based on home owner feedback we updated our homeowners' webpage with clearer guidance on when and how Southwark refunds service charge overpayments.
- We held a focus group with home owners who told us that the best way to provide them with the information they need about the responsibilities of the landlord and homeowners was on the homeowners' webpage rather than videos.
- We have made sure that now where we are doing any regeneration or major works projects that we include our cleaning and grounds maintenance teams in the selection of materials and finishes to communal areas so that whatever is chosen can be cleaned easily.

Progress update

- We have a long term project to improve the 'MySouthwark' account moving from Self-Serve to Housing On-Line. One of the key benefits of the project we have achieved is that home owners can now download a PDF service charge statement. We are now working on home owners being able to view their Service Charge Schedules Payments and Debit and Credits on their accounts.
- We have increased the opportunities for all residents to be involved widening the ways they can be involved to improve and increase direct feedback.
- We benchmarked against a range of external organisations on how they deliver services to home owners to identify how well we deliver services in comparison.
- We incorporated sections in our internal procedures for resident services and asb officers dealing with anti-social behaviour (ASB) on how to deal with breaches of the lease involving home owners.
- Based on home owner feedback we will update the homeowners' webpage annually in March when all the funding opportunities are open for applications.
- We have created a dedicated webpage called 'How We Manage Our Estates' for all residents covering the following areas that tell you the standards of cleaning and frequency you can expect, how we monitor performance and how to join our estate walkabouts. We will also update this webpage every quarter to show you how we are performing.
- To improve how our resident services manage issues facing home owners we have provided them with access to free external training on a range of management issues relating to home owners.
- We ran two pilot schemes to look at how we could provide improved information on the variances between your estimates and actual service charge invoices you receive. The learning is now feeding into how Southwark will automate the construction of your service charges.
- We provided guidance on the homeowners' webpage regarding Southwark's approach to requests from buyers and sellers for EWS1 forms being requested by mortgage lenders.
- We now offer every prospective right to buy applicant the opportunity to attend a face to face session with a council officer to talk through 'what being a leaseholder involves' so they understand their future obligations and the costs associated with becoming a leaseholder.
- We held a focus group with home owners to seek feedback on what we could improve on the homeowners' webpage and the website in general. The feedback will be shared so that the team responsible can make improvements.
- We have redesigned and simplified our estate cleaning schedules and displayed them on all of our estate noticeboards
- The officers responsible for the collection of service charges now regularly meet our Citizens Advice Bureau partners who support home owners with issues they can't resolve to work more closely together.

Progress update

More to do including...

- Encourage more homeowner participation in Estate inspections
- Up to date information for homeowners and tenants via digital noticeboards on our estates
- Enable homeowners in street properties to have more say in how their properties are maintained
- Allow homeowners in 100% leasehold blocks to take control of major works on their estate
- Provide average maintenance cost of running a home for perspective buyers
- Continue building new council homes to reach target of 1,000 new homes by 2022
- Review the council's end to end process of procuring, management and consultation on major works projects putting Resident First.
- Pilot leaseholders and tenants being part of procurement of key contracts for a range of key contracts
- Explore alternative dispute resolution relating to major works contracts and provide independent scrutiny
- Assess feasibility of a single, rolling 5 year capital programme (preferably within a 30 year asset management programme), identifying all proposed major works to each block/estate, including engineering works.
- Provide quarterly KPI information showing the variance between initial and final major works invoices.
- Improved clarity for leaseholders on why they cannot disconnect from district heating systems
- Improvements and amendments to service charge invoices
- Provide more information on service charges on the council's website
- Budget estimate for major works estimate on the notice of intention.
- Review our Pre Assignment Welcome Pack
- Improving the homeowners web page with relevant information with the aim of it being a single source reference
- Improve the KPI area of homeowners web pages and include all Key homeowner KPI information
- Ensure the review and redesign of i-casework (our complaints system) including being able to log complaints by tenure so moving forward we can focus on issues and lessons learnt that directly impact on homeowners

