

Disabled People's Action Forum 12.03.26 Minutes

1. Introduction

KeyRing are a national charity who run the Southwark Disability Hub. The Southwark Disability Hub has recently taken over facilitating Southwark's Disabled People's Action Forum (DPAF) from the council. Its role is to support with organisation and marketing.

In the previous forum meeting on the 27th November 2025, people were asked to vote on which topics they would most like to focus on within the Forum. Housing was the most voted topic. This forum meeting is an opportunity to discuss housing issues in more detail.

2. Purpose of the Disabled People's Action Forum

The Disabled People's Action Forum is an advocacy group representing the voices of disabled people in the borough of Southwark. Its purpose is to identify issues, concerns/, and areas of interest for people in the borough and to advocate for disabled people on these topics. It meets four times a year.

The Forum is here to represent the voices of people with disabilities, including those who may not be present at this forum. People are invited to share their thoughts as shaped by their personal experiences, but the forum can't solve very specific individual problems. It is about building up a wider picture.

3. The Working Group – description and expectations

A Working Group is going to be set up to help lead the Forum. It will meet at least once between the quarterly Forum meetings. The Working Group will identify the specific issues it would like to focus on, and decide on actions for the Working Group and the Forum to take to reach a desired outcome. The Forum meets quarterly and will provide an overview of the Working Group's decisions. The Working Group will be able to invite stakeholders and topic "experts" to join discussions, and to come to the Forum meetings.

Anyone can be a member of the Working Group, but it is suggested that it should be a small number of people that have the time to do the necessary work moving from "problem" to "action plan". The specific Working Group may end at this point, or the Working Group can review and amended the Action Plan over time.

When we previously asked members what subjects they would like to address in the Working Group, Housing had the highest number of votes, followed by Transport.

As the Forum structure is still being set up, we thought that we should begin with one Working Group for Housing and see how that goes before starting any additional Working Groups.

4. Housing Discussion

For the remainder of the meeting, the Forum split into four different groups for discussions on Housing topics. These discussions were based on Housing issues brought up at the previous Forum meeting.

The three discussion topics were:

1. Accessing Accessible Housing
2. Repairs and Complaints
3. Housing Staff

See Annex for a detailed summary of the discussions.

5. Council Notices

Visitors from Southwark Council reminded attendees about the upcoming local elections on Thursday 7th May. They encouraged people to register to vote in the local elections, to apply for a postal vote, and reminded attendees that they will need accepted Photo ID to vote. If people do not have the required photo ID, they can apply for a 'Voter Authority Certificate' for free.

Council staff also told attendees about the Better Bus Southwark project. They invited attendees to share their thoughts on bus routes in Southwark using the webpage.

Annex 1: Short summary of Housing Discussions

Disabled residents said accessing housing is confusing, inconsistent, and not designed around their needs. The bidding system lacks transparency, with unclear "codes" and repeated proof of disability. Support is hard to access. Communication barriers are significant, especially for Deaf residents. Housing Association tenants and those on waiting lists feel overlooked, with limited information and support.

Repairs and complaints raised serious safety and quality concerns. Repairs are often difficult to report due to reliance on phone systems, long waiting times, and limited accessible communication options. Delays leave issues unresolved and sometimes unsafe. Participants reported poor-quality work, repeat visits, and no inspections, alongside unclear communication. Stronger standards, oversight, and prioritisation were requested.

Experiences with housing staff were often negative, with poor communication, lack of respect, and inconsistent support affecting mental health. Deaf residents reported ignored needs and lack of accessible communication. There is limited understanding of different disabilities. Participants called for named contacts, better training, clearer complaints processes, improved follow-up, and a more respectful, accountable service.

Annex 2: Detailed summary of Housing Discussions

1. Accessing Accessible Housing

1.1 Barriers to getting housing

People said the bidding system is hard to understand, not transparent, and doesn't reflect disabled people's needs. Many felt they had to prove or justify their disability before getting support, which felt discrediting.

Lots of support sessions are reliant on being "in the right place at the right time" which doesn't work for people with mobility issues or caring responsibilities, or through long phone calls. The system was described as "one size fits all," which doesn't work in practice.

There were also concerns that:

- disabled people are on the same bidding/ranking system and others, with the only thing distinguishing them being a code – participants felt the meaning of these codes was unclear and they didn't make a meaningful difference to how their needs were viewed
- adapted homes are sometimes offered to non-disabled people
- forms and medical assessments feel impersonal and not done *with* people

1.2 Communication and access (including Deaf residents)

Communication came up as a major barrier. People want:

- information in different formats (paper, large print, plain English)
- text, WhatsApp, and face-to-face options

Deaf participants described very significant barriers:

- long waits for interpreters (sometimes up to two weeks)
- having limited time available with interpreters to help them sort issues, then wasting most of that appointment waiting on hold
- inaccessible websites and forms (no BSL)
- being excluded from meetings and communications about them

They also raised safety concerns, such as no visual intercoms or deaf-friendly fire alarms, and said new builds are not always designed with Deaf access in mind.

Deaf residents said that when they were told repeatedly that there wasn't budget for an interpreter, it felt like people were saying that listening to them wasn't worth the money.

1.3 Support, fairness and different housing types

Participants said they need:

- more accessible housing officers
- specialist disability-trained staff
- clearer escalation routes and follow-up (currently missing)
- advocacy support ("someone on your side")

Housing Association tenants felt they have fewer rights and less clarity than council tenants, with outdated handbooks and unclear complaints processes. There was a strong feeling that systems should be the same across council and Housing Associations, so people are not treated as "second class." There were also questions about how private renters could access the same support as council residents.

1.4 Waiting lists and future improvements

People on waiting lists said they feel invisible and poorly informed. Many are afraid to report changes in health in case it affects their priority. There is no space for them to connect, unlike tenant groups.

They asked for:

- clearer information on how housing is allocated
- more transparency about available housing (including adapted homes)
- more housing options for people with lower support needs but still vulnerable
- accessible application forms (easy read, plain English, large print)

Participants also wanted:

- a clear published policy on disability and housing
- more in-person and hybrid support (e.g. library sessions, 1:1 help)
- involvement in designing new housing (co-production)
- meetings with senior council staff, safeguarding leads, and legal advisers
- measurable change and accountability from the council

2. Repairs and Complaints

2.1 Reporting repairs and communication barriers

Reporting repairs was described as slow, difficult, and often inaccessible.

People want:

- quick reporting through text, email, or WhatsApp
- the ability to send photos/videos
- access to a real person locally, not just call centres
- for the council system to raise a “red flag” if a disabled residents has over 3-4 outstanding repairs, meaning these are dealt with urgently rather than having to wait in a dangerous home for piecemeal repairs

Deaf participants said the system does not work for them:

- long waits mean interpreter time runs out before anything is resolved

- they cannot rely on phone calls
- repairs teams often try to call instead of text
- sometimes issues go unreported because communication is too difficult
- new systems (e.g. heating) fitted without contractors being able to properly communicate how to operate them, leaving Deaf residents unsure how to use things in their own home

Some said they are forced to rely on family members, which they do not want to do.

2.2 Delays, safety and impact

Delays in repairs were described as serious and sometimes unsafe:

- broken doors, alarms, intercoms and heating systems
- feeling unsafe in the home, especially for Deaf residents
- emergencies taking weeks instead of being dealt with quickly

People said that when repairs aren't done, it builds stress and can make health worse over time. Some reported being told to fix things themselves.

2.3 Quality of work and contractors

There were strong concerns about poor-quality repairs and lack of accountability:

- repeated visits for the same issue (e.g. 7 visits over 3 months)
- work not done properly the first time
- no checks after contractors leave

Participants want:

- proper regulation and monitoring of contractors
- inspections after work is completed
- clear standards for what "good" looks like
- better communication about who is coming and when (including ID and notice)

Some also raised issues about contractors not respecting people's homes or space, including experiences of disrespect and cultural insensitivity.

2.4 Safety, support and system changes

Participants asked for:

- support from housing or Adult Social Care during visits if needed
- disability awareness training for contractors
- systems to flag multiple unresolved repairs and prioritise them
- a designated contact if issues build up

There were also calls for:

- a clearer complaints process
- better support when relationships with housing officers break down
- equal standards across council, Housing Associations, and private renters
- stronger oversight from the council

3. Housing Staff

Many participants expressed the need for a dedicated Disability Housing Officer role – someone trained in various kinds of disability, who is a main point of contact for disabled residents can assist other Residential Support Officers in delivering specialised services.

3.1 Experiences of staff and impact

Many participants said their experiences with housing staff have been negative, and sometimes traumatic. People described:

- feeling disrespected or not listened to
- poor communication
- being treated differently because of disability

This has had a real impact on mental health and made some people less likely to ask for help again.

3.2 Communication and understanding disability

Deaf participants said staff often ignore or miss information about their needs:

- disability markers on systems not being checked
- staff speaking instead of communicating in accessible ways
- no clear explanations of decisions or actions
- there is an expectation that BSL speakers will be able to read English even though it is not their language

Participants asked for:

- deaf awareness and basic sign language training
- better preparation before meetings
- use of video calls (for hearing-impaired residents who lipread) and speech-to-text tools
- clear explanations of equipment and processes
- Text-to-voice tools on council sites, for visually impaired residents

More broadly, participants said staff need better understanding of:

- neurodiversity and masking
- mental health
- dyslexia and communication needs
- cultural differences

3.3 Consistency, trust and relationships

Participants said the service is too dependent on individual staff. Some are very good, but others are not, leading to inconsistency. Groups felt that it was often RSO managers who were failing disabled residents, and that these were the staff who often had the least understanding. Some shared they had good experiences with excellent RSO managers who had moved on from the role, and were keen for the knowledge and expertise of these staff to be passed on

They asked for:

- one named contact or advocate per area
- clearer escalation routes (without having to re-prove disability)
- better follow-up
- less reliance on call centres

Positive experiences showed that when staff take time to understand and communicate properly, it makes a big difference.

3.4. Improvements to staff culture and systems

Participants called for:

- better training for all staff, including call centres
- improved staff retention (so residents don't deal with new people each time)
- clearer complaints processes
- an end to practices like cold-calling from contractors
- proper notice and clear information before visits

There were also wider suggestions:

- a resident charter setting out expected standards
- more proactive council support for Housing Association tenants
- clearer support for private renters moving into supported housing
- more respect in how residents are spoken to

The group also wanted to understand how future policy (such as the Renters' Rights Act) will affect disabled people.