



Equality Peer Challenge

The London Borough of Tower Hamlets

27<sup>th</sup> February 2014

Report

# 1. Background

This report is a summary of the findings of an equality peer challenge organised by the Local Government Association (LGA) and carried out by its trained peers. The report satisfies the requirements of the Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG) for an external re-assessment at the 'excellent' level. The peer challenge is designed to validate a service's own self-assessment at this level by considering documentary evidence and carrying out a series of interviews and focus groups with employees, councillors and other stakeholders.

The basis for the peer challenge is a benchmark against five areas of performance. They are:

- Knowing your communities
- Leadership, partnership and organisational commitment
- Community engagement and satisfaction
- Responsive services and customer care
- A skilled and committed workforce

The peer challenge is not an inspection; rather it offers an external assessment of an organisation's own judgement of itself against the equality framework benchmark, by critical friends who have experience of delivering an equality agenda in their own organisation. The assessment is a reflection of the evidence presented to the peer team, through reading the documentary evidence submitted in advance, and the interviews and focus groups when on site.

The team was:

Lead peer: Patricia Oakley, London Fire Brigade  
Member peer: Marie Pye, London Borough of Waltham Forest  
Officer peer: Sharon Robinson, Hertfordshire County Council  
Challenge manager: Deborah Carson, Local Government Association

The team appreciates the welcome and hospitality provided by the service and would like to thank everybody that they met during the process for their time and contributions.

## 2. Executive summary and recommendations

Following this equality peer challenge, we have reached the following conclusion:

**Tower Hamlets council has completed a satisfactory re-assessment against the criteria for the 'excellent' level of the Equality Framework for Local Government.**

The organisation was able to evidence how it has built on experience and expertise in tackling inequality since the previous assessment in 2010, and highlight how it has adapted methods and structures to address the new challenges that it faces. Despite experiencing ongoing financial pressure and a significant growth in the local population, the organisation continues to focus its resources on improving outcomes for its most vulnerable communities, with equality underpinning the council's work with partners and

stakeholders to contribute to improved outcomes for people living and working in the borough.

Strong political and managerial leadership on equalities permeates Tower Hamlets council. This appears to instil confidence across the organisation and staff have a clear understanding of equality, and how it can be used as a key driver for delivering improvements in the borough. There is evidence of nuanced and sophisticated partnership working, on areas such as hate crime and managing community tensions, which are clearly having a significant positive effect in the ability of the council to respond quickly to situations as they arise.

TH has good quality up to date information about the demographics of its local communities, and commissions research regularly both internally and from partners to supplement knowledge about changes to the makeup of the borough. The council uses its diverse workforce to enrich this data, enabling it to build up a sophisticated and up to date picture of the local area. There was good evidence of how the council uses data to understand trends, characteristics and challenges and targets resources accordingly. Information is shared consistently with partners and stakeholders, and ward profiles are used for local budget setting.

The council uses commissioning and procurement to significant effect as a means of delivering on local equality and economic objectives. In order to get better value for money, its procurement strategy links equalities into the organisation's corporate vision and objectives, and opportunities to obtain wider (community) benefits when procuring have been identified and pursued.

To help the service improve we have made a number of recommendations that the council may want to consider:

- Provision of more support to Members by supplementing the data from the ward profiles with intelligence on 'what does this mean' for communities in relation to equality.
- Continue to consider the needs of older established communities whilst embracing development opportunities that are contributing to the regeneration of the borough.
- Closely monitor how the generic policy officer role encourages a strong focus on equality and diversity, to ensure that as the work is embedded and becomes "business as usual" the council is still able to monitor progress and show improvement.
- Improve representation of disabled people in the Community Champions cohort, in order to make this group more representative.
- Ensure that they are able to gather Hate Crime statistics for disabled people in the borough.

### **3. Detailed findings**

#### **3.1 Knowing your communities**

##### **Strengths:**

1. The council uses the Corporate Research Team to good effect; the unit is commissioned regularly by a variety of services from across the council to provide up to date information on the needs and profile of the local community. The unit sits alongside the strategy team and so is well placed to influence policy. They produce regular publications including a Quarterly Research Bulletin, labour market briefing, housing market fact sheet as well as individual fact sheets and briefings on topical issues. There was evidence of several recent publications that have focused on inequality including a poverty briefing, welfare reform briefing, economic immigration, employment and enterprise in TH and financial capability.
2. The organisation has a sophisticated understanding of the equality profile of the local area and how that translates to inequalities for different groups. The council uses a range of consultation mechanisms, and is pragmatic about working with partners to share information and uses this to target resources to where they will impact positively on vulnerable people and protected groups. For example educational outcomes and performance are regularly reviewed using a number of indicators. Pupil level achievement data profiles are produced for individual schools which enable the council to monitor differences in outcomes between groups of students and shape teaching and learning support to better meet diverse needs.
3. Using the characteristics identified by the Equality Act and PSED, the council uses a “cycle of action” to describe and reinforce how its work on tackling inequality, strengthening cohesion and building community leadership underpins the concept of One Tower Hamlets. The authority produces comprehensive borough equality assessments (replacing the previous six Equality Schemes), disaggregated by protected characteristics, that support work across the council to promote improvements in life chances for its residents.

##### **Areas for consideration:**

1. It was not clear how the Corporate Research Team interact with Members other than through the provision of Ward profiles, and no evidence that Elected Members commission studies from the Team or that the limited resource for programmed rather than commissioned investigations was influenced by Member concerns. TH may want to consider providing more support to Members by supplementing the data from the ward profiles with intelligence on ‘what does this mean’ for communities in relation to equality.
2. TH must continue to be mindful to the risk of alienating older established communities whilst embracing development opportunities that are contributing to the regeneration of the borough.

## **3.2. Leadership, partnership and organisational commitment**

### **Strengths:**

1. The council has moved to an Executive Mayoral model, which has strengthened the council's work on delivering One Tower Hamlets. The Mayor takes a strong leadership role on equality, and there is a clearly articulated vision about the council's vision for the borough and priorities. The Chair of the Equality Steering Group maintains a robust high level focus on communities experiencing inequality when making key decisions on, for example, regeneration or housing programmes. The Scrutiny process continues to be a key driver for a continued commitment to equality.
2. The council has carried out a restructure of the strategy, policy and performance functions across the council, with the aim of strengthening the promotion of equality across all three of these activities. The generic roles developed through this restructure are all responsible for providing equality related support and advice, and ensuring that the One Tower Hamlets objectives inform all key corporate strategies. The council uses its Single Equality Framework (SEF) to describe how work to promote equality is delivered and the priorities identified in the SEF are embedded in the council's Strategic Plan.
3. There is strong evidence of effective partnership working. For example the Community Cohesion Contingency Planning and Tension Monitoring Group, chaired by the Service Head for Strategy and Equality, has been developed to help the borough better understand the issues which can threaten community cohesion. The group meets regularly to share information and track issues of concern, and has established a Contingency Plan that provides guidance to council services and partners to support a fast and proportionate response to an incident that is likely to lead to a risk to community cohesion. The partnership is based very much on trust, and has strong commitment and leadership from the council. Since the last assessment the plan has been activated on six separate occasions. The group has been noted as an exemplary partnership and is currently supporting work on the Pan London Hate Crime Strategy.

### **Areas for consideration:**

1. Whilst the council's new structure encourages a strong focus on equality and diversity, there is an on-going challenge around sustaining this focus. For example, incorporating equality objectives into the council's strategic plan demonstrates equality is embedded, but makes it difficult to evidence how progress is being tracked on tackling inequality. There is a danger that as the work becomes more "business as usual" the council becomes less able to monitor and evidence progress and demonstrate how equality initiatives and interventions are adding value. The new generic policy officer roles which have an equality function may rely on the enthusiasm of the individual which may be lost due to staff turnover.

### 3.3 Community engagement and satisfaction

#### Strengths:

1. The council has developed a strong programme of engagement around the effects of welfare reform. The “Prepare and Act Now” campaign has targeted support to residents highlighted as being at risk from changes to welfare benefits. In total over 700 residents have attended a series of events and received 1:1 advice. The council has worked closely with Tower Hamlets Homes (THH) to train practitioners, who are then able to engage residents and minimise or mitigate the negative impacts of the reforms.
2. The council is a pathfinder authority for the Neighbourhood Agreements programme and use these agreements to very positive effect across the borough. Between 2011 and 2013 TH has supported ten Neighbourhood Agreements across the borough, each with their own objectives. The approach has been established as an innovative and effective solution to long-standing problems at ward and estate level, where activity is informed by what residents know about their local area. The agreements are used to identify agreed priorities for a local area, assess how services and residents can work to address these priorities, and set out standards of service. There was good evidence of where local residents have been given greater autonomy to work together and with providers to identify local issues and design solutions to address these issues. For example, an initial pilot project on a single estate has resulted in a disused building being brought back into (community) use, which has provided a catalyst to the community to gain extra funding for further neighbourhood improvements.
3. The Children’s Social Care team undertake specific work targeted at Muslim and African families in order to improve outcomes for them. There was evidence of targeted support aimed at Muslim families over the past year, including the first Bangladeshi Carers Dad Programme, engaging and training facilitators from religious and community organisations in the delivery of the Positive Change Programme and the ‘Working with Bangladeshi Families’ training for Professionals. The Tower Hamlets African Family Service was a good example of direct engagement work with children and families in schools and service users in order to meet the specific needs of African families. What is exceptional about this service is that it is an integral part of the Council provision and provides assistance and advice to improve the way interventions with African families are managed and policies are developed. TH social workers receive training from the African Families Service and this training is also accessed by national and international agencies.
4. Since the previous assessment in 2010, engagement activities with the white working class community has improved. The council bases this around a well-considered understanding of the needs of this community. Following targeted community engagement activity, the council identified intergenerationality as a key cohesion challenge with this community, with many older residents suffering from social isolation and poor health outcomes as a result. On the basis of these findings, TH developed a series of very locally focused intergenerational activities and projects which appear to be having positive results. Impacts will need to be tracked carefully to benchmark progress.

### **Areas for consideration:**

1. Whilst the development of Community Champions in the borough can be considered notable practice, only 9% of the current cohort has a disability. This compares with 22% in the borough overall. More work could be done to recruit disabled community champions, possibly through the Local Voices project.

## **3.4 Responsive services and customer care**

### **Strengths:**

1. The Local Voices project builds on previous consultation and engagement work, including the council's previous Disability Equality Schemes reviews. TH developed this project following the findings of the previous Peer Challenge, when the Peers highlighted richer engagement with disabled people as a key area for consideration. The council conducted detailed research with over 300 participants at workshops and other activities, and gathered nearly 1,000 pieces of information to help understand the issues and challenges for disabled people in the borough. Participants reflected the diversity of the borough, with people from a wide range of ethnicities, age groups and impairment types having their say. Participants co-developed an action plan, which has helped the council develop a new model for consultation with disabled people.
2. The council has one of the highest rates of reported domestic violence incidents in London, and recognising this as a key priority area, has developed the TH Violence against Women and Girls Plan. The plan consolidates all the activities undertaken by the council and partners to raise awareness, promote safeguarding processes and deliver support to victims. The plan looks at the issue through the lens of the PSED, and has a detailed action plan delivered through a sophisticated partnership approach, targeting and sharing resources, and carefully monitoring progress.
3. The council has a good corporate approach to procurement that includes a visible commitment to equalities, closely aligned to its corporate vision and objectives. There was evidence that TH has identified opportunities to obtain wider community benefits, for example through using community benefit clauses to support more permanent employment opportunities for the long term unemployed, as well as providing training and work placements for young people. There was evidence of procurement and service managers working together effectively across a range of commissioning activities. Overall, the council appears to effectively use commissioning and procurement as a means of delivering on local equality and economic objectives. For example, the Tower Hamlets Local Plan is considered to be a national example of best practice across both public and private sector planners. Significant contracts have been procured through the Decent Homes programme with THH and equality objectives have been key to this. The Council's commitment to maintain open spaces, support street markets and encourage small businesses demonstrates an understanding of the practical requirements of local people and acknowledgement of what is required to sustain communities.
4. As a result of equalities assessment the council has increased provision and engagement of fathers and male carers, which has resulted in an increased number and diversity of parent/ carer volunteers trained and recruited from marginalised,

vulnerable groups. The Dads Network has been established and a number of events organised to increase involvement in children's learning and development, including school based courses and workshops for fathers and male carers.

5. Tower Hamlets identified that between 2009/10 and 2010/11 experiences for people with dementia and their carers in the borough was particularly poor. At the same time, the London Dementia Health Care Needs Assessment suggested a 31.6% increase in people with dementia in Tower Hamlets by 2021 with growth in the older Bengali population who, as a consequence of higher cardiovascular risk, also have a higher risk of vascular dementia. To address this, the council has developed an entirely new care pathway for people with dementia, including a Community Dementia Team and Dementia Adviser Service, Diagnostic Memory Clinic and Dementia cafés in Sylheti and English. This has resulted in evidence of demonstrable and rapid improvement in outcomes for people with dementia.

#### **Areas for consideration:**

1. The team were not able to evidence hate crime statistics in relation to disabled people.
2. Whilst it is acknowledged by the team that the council is in the relatively early stages of embedding a new approach to Equality Impact Assessments/ Equality analysis, there was evidence of some inconsistencies in the quality of these assessments. It may be that giving a stronger role for the equality steering group to peer review/challenge would support more consistent analysis.

### **3.5 A skilled and committed workforce**

#### **Strengths:**

1. Target setting has been a key driver for success in TH. Despite an overall reduction in staff numbers, the council has recruited in a number of areas, and has used a very successful apprenticeship programme in a number of vocational areas including Planning and Building Control and Youth Services. 53 apprenticeships were started between 2011 and 2013, with the equality profile of the apprentices reflecting the diversity of the borough (half being women, and 70% from BME backgrounds). The council has worked with its providers so that a number of apprentices work a proportion of their time within TH and a proportion within other partner organisations/ providers. This offers a richness of learning and development, and of the 2011-2013 cohort, all have remained with the council after concluding their apprenticeships.
2. The Navigate programme supports the wider aims of the Workforce to Reflect the Community strategy, by encouraging the progression of staff at all levels of the organisation. The programme uses a series of targeted learning and development interventions with the aim of increasing the representation of women, BME and disabled staff in LP07 posts and above, across the council. (note that LPO7 more or less equivalent to top 5% of earners – the council having changed the measure to make it less subject to fluctuation and easier for staff and members to understand and track and report on). There was evidence that the use of tailored personal development plans is making a real difference in enhancing experience in staff

involved in the programme, which appears to be providing a richer pool of talent further up the organisation. Staff spoke very positively about the support that they receive from managers and the constructive impact it has had on them both personally and professionally.

3. Recognising a challenge highlighted in the 2010 report around the need to achieve higher response rates from LGB, BME and disabled staff, the council can show a gradual improvement over the last five years. For example, some targeted work to improve the monitoring of sexual orientation of service users in certain services where declaration levels are low has been used as a driver to encourage staff to declare their sexual orientation. HR ran a campaign (including individual letters/emails to all members of staff) aimed at increasing personal declarations of sexuality and disability by staff. Its effectiveness has been reviewed and a new, amended exercise will be undertaken this year.

#### **Areas for consideration:**

1. Although the council has focused on rationalising senior management and creating a flatter, more generic operational structure, there is still a lack of diversity in the top 5% of earners, with a lack of progression still evidenced at grade PO7 and above.
2. There is a need to increase levels of declaration of disability within the council in order to enable directorates to set local targets to increase representation. One way of achieving this, as set out in the council's action plan, is to recruit through the Navigate initiative and set targets for under-represented groups.

## **4. Examples of innovative projects and initiatives**

### **6.1 The Local Voices project**

This project was started in 2012 to establish the issues and concerns of local disabled people. Local disabled people were able to participate in the project through workshops, discussions groups, community activities, events, surveys and social media activity. The project was supervised by a steering group of eight local disabled people with a mixture of impairments, ages, ethnicities and genders. A scoring system was developed based on the proportion, volume and impact of information that was brought up. Local Voices and the council then created an action plan based on the information, which is currently being implemented. Participants in the project are also helping the council involve more disabled people in decision making and designing services.

### **6.2 Community Cohesion Contingency Planning and Tension Monitoring Group (CCCPTMG)**

The CCCPTMG was formed to help the council better understand the issues and pressures which threaten community relations in the borough and to enable TH to work closely with community and statutory partners to prevent damage to relations between people in the borough. Membership of the group has developed over time but currently includes representatives from the Council's Youth Service, Community Safety Team, Emergency Planning Unit and Communications Team as well as senior Police officers and community representatives from faith communities, the LGBT community forum, registered social landlords, youth organisations and Tower Hamlets College. It is chaired by the

Service Head, Corporate Strategy and Equality. The Group meets every six weeks to share information and track issues of concern, putting in place actions and interventions to address these issues. In addition to this on-going work, TH worked with the Group to develop the Tower Hamlets Community Cohesion Contingency Plan which sets out the mechanisms for responding to cohesion related incidents and supports the Council's emergency planning procedures.

### **6.3 Improving pathways for people with dementia**

Having launched in November 2011, the council's new dementia pathway has received substantial acclaim. The CEO of the Alzheimer's Society described Tower Hamlets' dementia pathway as one of the most impressive he had seen whilst the NHS Tower Hamlets Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) chose the partnership work around dementia as one of its three case studies for authorisation. In March 2013, Tower Hamlets Council, the East London Foundation Trust, the Alzheimer's Society and the Tower Hamlets Clinical Commissioning Group received a Local Government Chronicle Award for this work.

### **6.4 Secondary School Consultation Fun Day**

As part of its work on embedding the Every Disabled Child Matters Charter in practice, Tower Hamlets organised and delivered a consultation event for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities. Developed using a working group with representatives from a range of stakeholders, the aim of the event was to find out what matters to young people in the borough, and establish how best to help families access services, as well as to inform the commissioning of particular services such as short breaks. Despite very bad weather on the day, approximately sixty young people from 8 mainstream secondary schools, aged between 11 and 18, attended. The young people involved had a wide range of conditions and difficulties, such as Developmental and Learning Disabilities, Cerebral Palsy, Downs Syndrome, Autism, Short stature, and Epilepsy.

### **6.5 No Place for Hate campaign**

Tower Hamlets works closely in partnership with the Police and other agencies to prevent all forms of hate crime, and takes action against perpetrators and supports and protects victims. The vision for this work on tackling hate crime is articulated through the 'No Place for Hate' campaign which centres around two pledges – one personal and the other organisational – in which people commit to actively challenging hate and promote positive engagement between people living and working in the borough. To date 1423 individuals and organisations have signed up to the Pledge. The pledge campaign and work to promote awareness, encourage reporting and build community cohesion across all communities through outreach activities is overseen by the No Place for Hate Board – an independent body of community and statutory organisations and groups. Since the campaign started a number of activities and programmes have been run under the No Place for Hate banner, including training of No Place for Hate champions, the development of a young people's pledge and marketing campaigns.

## **6. Signposting to areas of good practice**

### **Bristol City Council**

Programme of projects to increase the workforce diversity with regards to people from a BAME background

Following research the council developed a programme of 25 projects to address the issue. Innovative projects include opportunities for reverse mentoring: white managers to

be mentored by BAME staff; involvement of trained BAME staff on selection panels; community representatives on selection panels; a BME Leadership Programme; targeted apprenticeship and internship schemes.

### **LB Hackney**

Councillor led ward forums are really effective vehicles for engagement. The Council is evaluating the success of the forums and has started to encourage the involvement of young people.

Representativeness of the Workforce - The Chief Executive was very clear that the Council's workforce needs to be representative of the community and his leadership is key to the progress made on this issue. The workforce is representative at all levels and this is regularly monitored. The Council is in the top quartile for BME staff in the top 5% of the workforce compared to other London Boroughs. Since 2011 the number of BMEs in the top 5% has increased by 7% to 28%. One in three frontline managers is black and 30% of middle managers are from a BME background.

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