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15 December 2016

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Dear Secretary of State

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS - PROPOSED REVISED DIRECTIONS

Thank you for your correspondence of 2nd December to our recent Best Value Action Plan progress report. I welcome the opportunity to offer further representations to you in relation to the proposed revised Directions and have set out my observations below.

PROCUREMENT

I welcome your intention to revoke the Direction relating to the Council's processes and practices entering into contracts especially noting that you are satisfied we have adopted procurement policies and practices that are compliant with the Best Value duty.

GRANTS

I am pleased you are satisfied that Tower Hamlets is able to carry out its grant making function and will return this to our control, albeit subject to oversight arrangements whereby the Commissioners can provide advice and offer scrutiny to ensure our compliance with the Best Value Duty.

I have no objection to oversight by the Commissioners. However it is fundamental that the Council can undertake this function without the need for case-by-case approval from the Commissioners. I am sure you would appreciate that if we are required to seek written approval on each and every application from Commissioners, the Council would not be exercising the function as stated in the Directions.

I regard the Direction and commissioners' satisfaction to be with reference to the process and not to the determination of individual grants. As you will know if the Commissioners are not satisfied with either the executive arrangements or the scrutiny arrangements they can direct the Council to put an alternative in place.

Therefore, before making your decision in relation to this Direction, I would appreciate your further consideration and clarification of this matter.

WHITECHAPEL WARD BY-ELECTION 2016

I am pleased you have acknowledged the significant progress made by the returning officer and team in improving the conduct of elections in Tower Hamlets. However, your letter mentioned that you are not yet minded to return power to the Council to appoint the returning officer until you are assured of the outcome of the Whitechapel by-election on 2nd December.

The Commissioners and Electoral Commission confirmed the Whitechapel by-election was well planned and conducted. The planning involved the Returning Officer, the Metropolitan Police, Commissioners and the Electoral Commission. The processes used to manage and promote the by-election followed the best practice model developed during the EU Referendum and the Greater London Authority elections in 2016. Max Caller (Commissioner) attended the training for polling staff to ensure quality control. The poll was conducted well with a particular focus on the integrity of the process both within the polling station and at the count. All statutory deadlines were met and no incidents or complaints were received throughout the timetable period.

Early next year the Council will begin planning for the Local and Mayoral elections in 2018 and all stakeholders will be invited to participate.

As result of this feedback, which can be confirmed with the Commissioners, I hope you are now in a position to reconsider your position on this Direction.

THE COMMISSIONER TEAM

Councillors and Officers continue to have a constructive and positive working relationship with Commissioners who have helped us understand the underlying problems of our Council in far greater detail, and have supported the Council to make the necessary progress to date.

I am pleased you recognise the Council has made significant progress implementing the Directions and that you are minded to reduce the number of Commissioners from four to three. However given the progress made, and the considerable ongoing cost to local taxpayers of supporting Commissioners, I would request that you consider a further reduction.

Finally, as Executive Mayor my priority is to make Tower Hamlets Council an open and transparent organisation that better serves local people. The Chief Executive and I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and the Commissioners to discuss the requirements for ending the Directions, as envisaged, in March 2017.

Yours sincerely



John Biggs
Executive Mayor of Tower Hamlets