



APPENDIX ONE

# **London Borough of Tower Hamlets Children's Services**

## **Draft Summary of the Inspection Improvement Plan 2017**

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## FOREWORD

We are pleased to introduce this summary, which describes how the council is responding to the recent Ofsted Single Inspection undertaken in January and February 2017, in order to dramatically improve children's social care in Tower Hamlets. Our improvement plan reflects an unwavering commitment to ensure that every child and young person gets the best start in life, is kept safe and protected from harm.

Children and young people who come to the attention of our services, especially children's social care, are some of the most vulnerable in the borough. Locally we have amongst the highest levels of child poverty and face a number of challenges including poor housing, unemployment and high levels of ill health. We need to support families who look after children and must ensure they get the best services whenever they need them.

The council has a critical role to play throughout a child's life and the services we provide should be of the highest quality and accessible to those who need them. The Ofsted inspection revealed extensive deep-rooted and longstanding problems across children's services that had built up over many years, but had not been sufficiently identified or addressed by senior managers. Political and organisational instability since 2010 also affected the focus, scrutiny and partnerships in relation to children's safeguarding. We are determined to

lead the change needed at all levels of the council to put this right.

The council will work with partners, frontline staff and, importantly, children and young people to ensure there is sustainable improvement in children's social care services. We will support our staff to do the best job they can for the most vulnerable people in our borough.

We will value social work and equip our staff to use their compassion and expertise to support families effectively and take tough decisions when needed. Before the Ofsted inspection we had already taken the decision to invest significant resources in our workforce. Good social workers make a real difference to the lives of children, young people and families in Tower Hamlets.

We are committed to keeping children and young people safe and protected from harm. There is no room for complacency so our plans for improvement require ambition, pace and a rigorous focus on improved outcomes for children and young people.



**Mayor John Biggs**

**Executive Mayor of Tower Hamlets**

**Cllr Amy Whitelock Gibbs**

**Lead Member for Children's Services and Education**



## INTRODUCTION

In January and February 2017 Ofsted carried out a single inspection of children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers, and the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB). On 7<sup>th</sup> April Ofsted published its report providing an overall judgement that Children's Services in Tower Hamlets are inadequate.

The Ofsted report outlined widespread and serious problems which had taken hold over a long period of time across children's services and local partnerships such as the LSCB. Some, but not all, of these issues had been uncovered since 2015 when the council had new political and corporate leadership, but the restorative action taken was neither timely nor effective. The Ofsted report made 15 recommendations which the local authority must act upon.

The Ofsted report highlighted poor frontline practice and ineffective, complacent and sometimes resistant management practices which enabled non-compliance with basic standards (including legal requirements), prevented any sustainable improvement and in some cases left children at risk of harm. The report also found a significant need for councillors and senior officers to demonstrate stronger leadership, management and governance that ensures there is robust performance management and scrutiny of children's social care. Significant improvement is needed at all levels across the council.

## WHY DID THIS HAPPEN IN TOWER HAMLETS?

In order to make sustainable progress in improving children's services, it is crucial to understand why such significant management and practice failures had developed over many years, and why successive senior managers and political leaders did not surface and address these challenges.

The inspection regime is much tougher than its predecessor and as a consequence more authorities have been rated inadequate having been rated good in the past. However, this is not an excuse.

To ensure the solutions in our improvement plan are effective, we need to understand why the council, including the senior management within children's services, failed to identify the scale of the endemic problems within practice and, when issues were identified, why the pace of change was insufficient.

There are multiple reasons but the key factors include: a failure of professional leadership at all levels, political and corporate focus on the many other areas of concern to be remedied after 2015 (linked to the Government's intervention under the previous administration); and a longstanding culture of false assurance – the perception our services were good – based on a view that local circumstances were 'special' so our approach was acceptably 'different'.

Tower Hamlets has experienced significant political instability, particularly between 2010-15, which led to attention and improvement action being focussed elsewhere, especially in those areas that exposed and triggered intervention by the Department of Communities and Local Government. This was exacerbated by a longstanding culture of divisive politics and a high volume of issues within the children's brief attracting significant public concern and attention, such as education, youth services and early years. There was insufficient scrutiny of children's social care and safeguarding from councillors of all political parties.

Children's services have experienced instability at all levels over many years, including departments being merged and then separated, the extensive use of interim staff in critical senior posts, and the loss of experienced staff and recruitment challenges. This led to a loss of the technical and specialist knowledge needed to keep children safe, higher workforce turnover, and lower standards in social work practice. There was a lack of managerial oversight needed to ensure standards are maintained and issues exposed in an appropriate and timely way.

There are many reasons why this happened including poor professional leadership, ineffective checks and balances, a lack of coherent workforce planning as well as a pervasive perception that children's services were good and our approach acceptably different, resulting in

widespread failure at practice level, which was not effectively addressed by managers. There was an overreliance by senior managers on staff at lower levels combined with insufficient professional, credible and motivational leadership, this was characterised by the ineffective introduction of a new vision and practice model for children's social care. There was a loss of confidence by frontline staff in the senior leadership of children's services that contributed to a culture of non-compliance with basic standards including legal requirements.

There was insufficient challenge at all levels and stretching back over many years. Senior officers and councillors were too ready to accept advice from officers that the approach in Tower Hamlets was unique and services remained good, despite being at odds with national benchmarks. This was exacerbated by inaccurate or misrepresented performance data that gave false assurance and masked the endemic problems.

The critical role of elected members in challenging senior leaders was critically weakened by the absence of an effective performance and accountability framework and robust data which should have been provided by officers. Often concerns were not escalated to senior managers or members and when problems eventually surfaced the information shared and the restorative action proposed was insufficient and limited.

We are taking rapid and sustainable action to address all the Ofsted recommendations and as an organisation asking ourselves tough questions so that we learn the lessons from the inspection to ensure that our services keep children safe and protected. We are on an improvement journey, one that demands excellence in everything we do that is why our staff, practice and services must put children, young people and families first.

### **WHY ARE WE PRODUCING THIS**

We are taking improvement action now and this summary describes the key elements. We are ambitious and aiming to achieve at least 'good' when we are re-inspected by Ofsted.

We have established an independently chaired children's services improvement board, refreshed the LSCB and refocused political leadership to bring stronger focus and oversight.

### **TOWER HAMLETS 10 COMPONENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL CHILDREN'S SERVICE**

This summary provides an overview of the LGA's good practice guide of the key components that make for a successful service. These provide a framework for the action children's services, the wider council and our partners are taking. It reflects the detailed work being undertaken already by the frontline service and wider council strategies and plans.

Improving children's social care requires a whole council approach which is ambitious for young people and in its pace of change.

### **A whole council vision for excellence**

We want children, young people and families to come first and for them to expect excellent services. This will ensure that children's social care services will share with education the same degree of political and strategic priority to guarantee that the desired outcomes for children and young people become a reality.

The council's strategic plan sets out the vision for excellence and recognises the council is on a significant improvement journey. A key outcome of the strategic plan is to ensure children get the best start in life and release their potential. This will be supported and driven by the work of the independently chaired children's services Improvement Board and closely monitored by a range of mechanisms including the Best Value Improvement Board which is chaired by the Mayor.

We will prioritise excellence at all levels and across the council and borough prioritising the standards and practice needed to keep children safe and protected from harm.

## **An outward facing organisation and culture**

In Tower Hamlets we want an outward facing organisation that seeks out best practice. This will be supported by clear corporate direction and a mature political environment characterised by informed and rigorous scrutiny and challenge that supports officers in achieving their improvement aims and objectives.

## **Corporate and political support and an ambition for excellence**

We want a strategic planning framework where the strategic plan, medium term financial strategy, workforce and transformation programs are underpinned by a rigorous performance management and accountability framework that drives continuous and sustainable improvement.

The relationship between members and the corporate director will continue to be strengthened and the introduction of a performance dashboard for each cabinet member will enable a robust conversation about achievements and areas that require attention. The development of outcomes based accountability will continue and will be a key element of the service's revised performance and accountability requirements.

## **Strong member-officer relationships based on trust and constructive challenge**

We want open, transparent, and constructive relationships between officers and members.

We will ensure members and officers received training and appropriate support to ensure relationships develop and are constructive so that they can be assured the right issues are receiving the attention needed.

## **A clear 'golden thread' from the political leadership through to the front-line**

We want a strong and robust link from our corporate priorities, through to the department, team and individual performance development targets.

Work is progressing to develop strong and robust links between corporate priorities and their associated outcomes framework, departmental and team plans through to individual performance development targets. To ensure this objective is fully realised, the council and partnership strategic planning framework will be reviewed to ensure that all relevant organisational and partnership strategies and plans are appropriately focused on the priorities for children, young people and families.

## **Strong and dynamic leadership throughout the organisation**

We want politicians and officers to work as one team, sharing a commitment to taking responsibility for delivering excellent services and

making a positive difference to children, young people and families.

The performance management function of politicians and senior managers has not been robust. Action is already progressing to ensure that this is fundamentally strengthened to enable evidence-based scrutiny, analysis of service quality and robust challenge. Supported by a culture of open and frank conversations where officers expose early warning signs about practice and politicians share concerning intelligence, the false assurances that were evident in the pre-inspection period will be eradicated.

The council's transformation programme supported by a new workforce strategy and redesign of social care will be central in ensuring that the service is united by common objectives, effective leaders and a focused workforce that are committed to new ways of working. Officers will be supported with a range of learning and development programs including mentoring and coaching.

### **A permanent and stable workforce with capacity and resources**

We want a talented, committed and passionate children's social care workforce that provides excellent services and drives improvement.

The council is investing in redesigning its children services and workforce to ensure it has outstanding people, with

the best skills, knowledge and experience to delivery excellent service to children, young people and families, and has already allocated £4.8m for this as part of the 3-year budget set in January 2017. We have a new workforce strategy for social care and a transformation programme, Smarter Together, designed to transform the way we work.

### **A strong model of practice, with good checks and balances**

In Tower Hamlets we want robust challenge and scrutiny of our social care practice and services to ensure we develop and maintain the highest standards for children, young people and their families.

The current model of social work practice, 'Signs of Safety' has not been effectively implemented and the Early Help model is not functioning as intended. Although it is planned to re-invigorate both models over time with effective multi-agency contributions, it is evident that for this to be successful a fundamental 'back to basics' training programme for all staff is necessary to recalibrate the services' understanding of statutory requirements. We are developing a range of learning and development that will be commissioned over the summer 2017.



## **Clear and embedded systems, processes and data**

We want the best information about children to inform and improve our decision-making.

The development of an advanced child-level performance management system is progressing effectively and rapidly to inform and improve our decision-making and oversight of services.

May 2017 saw the introduction of a cleansed and reliable child level data set accompanied by programs of auditing and dip sampling. These are essential tools to enable all managers to monitor and evaluate the quality of practice. Support and training is being offered to enable these materials to become central to day to day line management activity.

Systems and processes will be constantly reviewed to ensure they are fit for purpose.

## **Strong coherent partnerships at strategic and operational level**

We want effective and innovative partnerships at strategic and operational levels to drive excellence and improvement for children, young people and families.

The Ofsted report made recommendations relating to the LSCB and the independent chair is in the process of making changes to improve its efficiency and effectiveness and to

better align it with the priorities of the social care service. Over the next period reviews of each partnership arrangement will be undertaken to ensure that they are properly focused upon the priorities for, and the needs of children, young people and their families.

We want effective and innovative partnerships at strategic and operational levels to drive excellence and improvement for children, young people and families.

Before January 2017, Tower Hamlets Strategic Partnership had not functioned for a number of years. Since then, the Mayor has chaired three meetings with partners designed to establish consensus about the need to work together on a place based agenda. In re-establishing the strategic partnership executive group, a programme of work is being developed that includes the development of a borough-wide vision, a new community plan, stakeholder engagement, borough wide spend analysis on outcomes and a review of current partnership boards and strategies.

## **A SUMMARY OF THE TOWER**

## **HAMLETS IMPROVEMENT PLAN**

The understanding set out above of why this happened in Tower Hamlets and the key components that make for a successful children's service provide a platform against which the detailed improvement objectives and actions have been planned and are now being implemented. To give them clear focus, these have been grouped under four themes that directly relate to the findings of the Ofsted inspection.

Set out below under each of theme is a synopsis of the improvement work that will be undertaken.

### **HOW WILL WE KNOW IF WE ARE SUCCESSFUL**

We are aiming for excellence and our improvement will be subject to periodic external mentoring by Ofsted with a full inspection within two years. By this time it is realistic for the council to aspire to be achieving good or better standards for the children, young people and families who use social care services.

### **Measures of progress**

The fundamental mechanism to achieve progress will be through the service sharing an unrelenting desire to focus on achieving excellence for children, young people and families.

There will be a rigorous performance management and accountability

framework based on both qualitative and quantitative measures to ensure each of the activities is monitored and evaluated for impact on children and improved outcomes. Any slippage in timescale or quality of service will be understood and actively managed. This will be regularly and rigorously overseen by councillors in both executive and scrutiny roles.

#### **THEME ONE**

##### **Leadership, management and governance**

###### **OBJECTIVES:**

- Effective leadership
- Informed and appropriately challenging elected members
- A skilled and highly performing workforce who understand their responsibilities
- Sufficient resources to meet the needs of children looked after.
- Effective service plans supported by excellent performance data.

###### **What difference will this make to children?**

- Children will know that there is increased scrutiny of the quality and nature of the services they receive.
- Children receive a service that is timely and of good quality provided by well-trained social workers

#### **THEME TWO**

##### **A robust model of social work**

**practice****OBJECTIVES:**

- Clear and understood thresholds for access to services
- Effective oversight by Child Protection conference chairs and Independent Reviewing Officers
- Safe and protected children
- Clear understandings of when care is to be used
- Excellent multi-agency involvement
- Effective assessments and high-quality planning
- Excellent levels of management oversight
- Effective management of children affected by Child Sexual Exploitation and gang affiliation
- High levels of understanding and application of the law relating to children who need care and adoption
- Excellent oversight of adoption by the agency decision maker

**What difference will this make to children?**

- Risks to children are identified in a timely way to ensure that they receive targeted support that specifically addresses their needs
- Children are involved fully in all decisions that concern them

**OBJECTIVES:**

- Good quality and regular supervision
- Comprehensive understanding of private fostering

**What difference will this make to children?**

- Children will know that managers understand what is happening and have clear oversight of what the social worker is aiming to do.

**THEME FOUR****Quality assurance and audit****OBJECTIVES:**

- A first-class quality assurance framework
- Effective and comprehensive programme of audit and dip sampling
- High level of management oversight of plans for care leavers.

**What difference will this make to children?**

- Children will benefit from knowing that there are systems in place that accurately records their life experiences.

**THEME THREE****Sufficient and skilled workforce**