

Responses to Questions not put at the Council meeting on 16th March 2022

11.1 Question from Councillor Krysten Perry:

Can the Mayor please provide us an update on the Mayor's Covid Recovery Fund?

Response of Mayor John Biggs:

The Mayor's Covid Recovery Fund invests £3.6 million across 45 projects to kickstart the borough's recovery from the pandemic. This is split across:

- 9 community led recovery projects
- 13 healthy recovery projects
- 3 economic recovery projects
- 20 projects focusing on supporting children and young people.

3 examples of the kind of work funded are:

The Mayor's High Street Clean Ups which targets litter and grime in high streets and town centres in the borough. This includes deep cleaning of pavements, graffiti removal, fly tip collection and litter picking.

Solace Women's Aid has been supported by funding for 3 additional domestic violence case workers, who specialise in mental health and working with the Somali community. During the pandemic domestic violence charities have reported a sharp increase in demand for services and we are doing our bit to tackle this.

It funds our COVID-19 Recovery Volunteer Hub assisting the Hub to register an additional 338 volunteers between October 2021 to February 2022, so we now have over 3,700 volunteer who are doing great work across our whole community.

11.2 Question from Councillor Peter Golds

Will the Mayor explain why Tower Hamlets under his leadership, has such a poor reputation in prosecuting fly tippers and issued no fixed penalty notices to fly tippers between 2015 and March 2021 according to DEFRA.

Response of Mayor John Biggs:

Tower Hamlets Council has a zero-tolerance approach to fly-tipping.

- We have stepped-up enforcement, increased monitoring of hotspot areas and improved communication. We have improved our clearance response times and made it easier for people to report fly-tipping using our website and Love Your Neighbourhood App.
- In February 2020, we increased the fixed penalty notice for fly-tipping from £80 to £400, with no discount for early payment. And we are prosecuting people and businesses who fail to pay.

- This January a local business was found guilty of illegal fly-tipping and ordered to pay £1,000 fine and £2,132 costs.
- Prior to April 2021 council teams used fixed penalty notices for littering to deal with most of the fly tipping incidents.
- In the period 2016 to 2021 we investigated over 57,000 incidents and issued approximately 3400 £80 Fixed Penalty Notices.
- Between December 2020 and December 2021, we carried out the following fly action:
 - 7,046 incidents investigated
 - 2,147 warning letters issued to residents for dumping or depositing waste on the wrong days
 - 231 warning letters issued to businesses
 - 431 £400 FPNs issued

11.3 Question from Councillor Rajib Ahmed:

What support and help has been given to local businesses during these difficult times by the council and how are we supporting local people back to employment in particular young people?

Response of Motin Uz-Zaman, Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Work, Economic Growth and Faith:

The council has done a huge amount to support residents and local businesses throughout the pandemic and we recently received a London councils award in recognition of our efforts.

Our business support includes:

- Distributing over £200m provided in grants and reliefs to more than 5,000 businesses.
- 598 businesses received free expert-led advice from the council
- Our Pivot, Creative Freelance and Business Adaptations Projects will provide support and grants to 475 small and micro businesses.

Our employment support for residents has included:

- WorkPath supported 326 residents into work in 2020/21.
- Support and training provided through the JETS programme to 259 residents who have been unemployed for over 12 weeks.
- Central London Works Programme has supported over 450 to overcome health barriers and get into work.
- 263 people have been equipped with tech and digital skills through apprenticeships and work experience opportunities through the LIFT Employability Incubator

For young residents, Young WorkPath has continued to support young people not in education, employment or training.

We secured 550 Kickstart placements across the borough, including 33 London Living Wage placements within the Council.

We re-established the Tower Hamlets Careers Leads Network.

11.4 Question from Councillor Kabir Ahmed

There have been recent reports that Tower Hamlets has once again failed to safeguard children, with one child going missing 107 times in two years and was found to be a victim of modern slavery. Can the Mayor explain why such gross negligence has taken place under his watch?

Response of Councillor Asma Begum, Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Children, Youth Services, Education and Equalities (Statutory Deputy Mayor:

Firstly, I'd like emphasise just how seriously we take these matters. Safeguarding children is one of our most important duties as a local council, and indeed a duty that all of us councillors share as corporate parents.

I want to draw Cllr Ahmed's attention to the Ofsted report which said that – and I quote – “Highly vulnerable children at risk of exploitation, including those missing from home, school or care, receive effective, bespoke services, delivered sensitively by skilled and committed staff. Strong partnerships serve to protect these children from harm.”

Ofsted has also said – and again I'm quoting – that “leaders and managers have had a relentless focus to improve practice to deliver good experiences and progress for children and their families.”

In response to the recent IICSA report, which I believe Cllr Ahmed is referring to, the report based upon a review of the work done by Councils and Police between April 2017 and April 2019 in six areas of the country including Tower Hamlets.

The Inquiry found weaknesses in safeguarding practice between 2017 and 2019, as had already been identified by Ofsted in their 2017 inspection, whilst recognising the positive improvements that the Council had delivered and which were recognised by Ofsted later in 2019 in their inspection report and which I've already mentioned.

There are some helpful recommendations from the IICSA report that will help with our local plans to strengthen the protection of children from sexual exploitation, in particular in respect of the consistent and systematic use of data, and the strengthening of our local problem profile.

We have already delivered a number of specific improvements including:

- The Violence, Vulnerability and Exploitation Strategy approved in 2020.
- Creating a dedicated Exploitation Team, which is now co-located with Police colleagues.
- Daily meetings are held to review risks and initiate protective actions.
- Creating a dedicated analyst role to collate intelligence which informs protection plans.
- Offering children who go missing a return home interview within 72 hours.

The Tower Hamlets Safeguarding Children's Partnership prioritises Child Sexual Exploitation as one of the three areas of harm that are our top priorities, and this work is guided by the Violence, Vulnerability and Exploitation Strategy 2021-24 approved in the autumn of 2020 and overseen by a dedicated multi-agency sub-group reporting to the Executive.

The Council has sustained its dedicated Exploitation Team, which ensures that the most vulnerable children receive skilled support and that partners are aware of the signs of exploitation, and this Exploitation Team is co-located with Police colleagues, and they hold a daily meeting to review information about risk and to task actions and interventions both to protect children as well as to disrupt and prosecute offenders, and this joint work has helped to identify an increased number of networks and children at risk in the past year.

We deliver multi-agency training in respect of exploitation and youth violence, and a Multi-Agency Risk Panel oversees the work with individual children who are at risk or have been harmed through sexual exploitation and the linked risks of criminal exploitation, missing, trafficking and serious youth violence.

11.5 Question from Councillor Dan Tomlinson:

How many School Streets have been implemented across the borough since 2018?

Response of Councillor Kahar Chowdhury, Cabinet Member for Highways and Public Realm – (Job Share post as part of Social Inclusion and Public Realm portfolio):

Tower Hamlets has implemented 23 school streets across the borough since 2018. This amounts to over 10,000 children receiving cleaner air and reduce health risk as a result of the scheme. Clean air is one of our key priorities and forms a part of the council's commitment to tackling the Climate Emergency. Tower Hamlets was declared a climate emergency in March 2019 and the council has committed to become a net zero carbon council by 2025 and a net zero carbon borough by 2045 or sooner.

It is important that we do our best to clean up the air we breathe in borough for our children, as the average lung capacity of a child in Tower Hamlets is up to 10 per cent less than the national average. Along with cleaner air, the school streets scheme has created more spaces for our children to play in a safe and healthy environment as we are keen to ensure the best start for every child.

11.6 Question from Councillor Andrew Wood:

Why did Tower Hamlets have the worst recycling rates in London in 2020/21 and the 2nd worst in the country?

Response of Councillor Asma Islam, Cabinet Member for Environment and Planning:

It is well established that people living in flats recycle less than those who live in houses. Most boroughs are able to easily capture food and garden waste from street level properties which boosts the overall recycling rate. 85% of properties in Tower Hamlets are flats and this poses a big challenge to achieve high recycling rates.

The quarter 1 and 2 2021/22 dry recycling only rate has shown that Tower Hamlets compares favourably with other London boroughs as well as outperforming a number.

ReLondon conducted a study in 2018 on Peabody estates across London to help understand why people in flats recycle less. We have gained funding, via CiL, to take forward ReLondon's recommendations including a roll out of their 'First Recycling Package' across the borough. This package includes clean and well-maintained bins and areas, and clear and visible signage on and above the bins. Extra funding has been awarded to develop a new communication campaign for 2022/23 to encourage behavioural change which includes raising awareness of the food waste collection service to houses/low rise properties and to increase participation. The Recycling Champions scheme went live in October 2021 and has over 40 members. The scheme aims to enable residents to help to spread the word about reducing, reusing and recycling amongst their peers.

We have gained funding, via CiL, to take forward the recommendations from the ReLondon study and roll out the Flats Recycling Package across the borough. This project will span the next three years and will improve the recycling facilities in blocks of flats and on estates to help and encourage more recycling.

Work is planned to raise awareness of the food waste collection service to houses/low rise properties and to increase participation. Promotion of the food waste collection service will begin in September 2022.

Extra funding has been awarded to develop a new communication campaign for 2022/23 to support behaviour change.

The Recycling Champions scheme went live in October 2021 and has over 40 members. The scheme aims to enable residents to help to spread the word about reducing, reusing and recycling amongst their peers.

11.7 Question from Councillor Val Whitehead:

Can the Mayor inform us of how many trees were lost in the borough due to Storm Eugene and what are the plans to replace them?

Response of Mayor John Biggs:

The council manages 25,000 trees across the borough. Of these, I'm sorry to say that 48 were brought down by the recent storms. 10 of these were on highways, and 38 in parks.

However I'm delighted to say that all of the trees that were lost during Storm Eunice will be replaced as part of our annual tree planting programme, which resumed on (Friday 25 February)

Over the last three years, more than 5,000 have been planted within the borough's Highways and parks.

Tower Hamlets is also among the first councils in the UK to join Trees for Streets, a national street tree sponsorship scheme that aims to plant more than 250,000 street trees nationwide over the next 10 years.

The parks' team will use the wood from the fallen trees as a soil improver and mulch to suppress weeds, and to create habitat piles for bugs and wildlife in parks' woodland areas. Some will also be turned into high-grade chip suitable for smaller biomass boilers and used to generate energy.

It is also available for any local artists or community groups who would like to use it to create benches or sculptures for public benefit.

All the Council's trees are inspected regularly by a qualified arboriculturist. High category trees, which include those in falling distance of a highway or play area, are inspected every 18 months. Low category trees are inspected every three years.

11.8 Question from Councillor Harun Miah:

On the council's website it states 'The housing crisis is the greatest challenge facing London today' can the Mayor explain why he has only built 224 new homes in his 7 years? Clearly this does not demonstrate a robust approach to tackling 'The housing crisis is the greatest challenge facing London today'.

Response of Councillor Danny Hassell, Cabinet Member for Housing:

- The housing crisis is a national problem which has a severe local impact.
- As a council, we're on track to deliver have 2,000 additional homes either delivered or in the pipeline by the end of this administration.
- These new homes are being delivered through a variety of routes, including newly built homes and buy-backs.
- We currently have completed 225 new build council homes, with another 225 on site.
- 157 new build homes were built in conjunction with a developer via a s.106 agreement.
- A further 179 new build sites have received planning consent and are due on site shortly. Another 42 have planning consent and 14 have been submitted for planning.
- Funding has been approved for 406 new builds and 32 acquisitions. Of these, 222 have been submitted for planning and the others are at pre-planning stages.
- A pipeline of other 318 other mainly new build homes are at various stages of feasibility, consultation and planning.
- In addition, 421 homes have been acquired from existing Council leaseholders, Poplar Harca disposals and a small number of out of borough purchases and 27 converted from other uses.

- This is 2,046 homes in total.

11.9 Question from Councillor Kevin Brady:

Can the Cabinet Member update me on the continued efforts to address the persistent fly-tipping & waste problems around Middleton Green and the surrounding areas, including Bethnal Green Road?

Response of Councillor Asma Islam, Cabinet Member for Environment and Planning:

Most of the fly tipping in these areas has been focused around the textile recycling banks. These are being removed and our Environmental Services teams will continue to monitor the area to identify those households responsible for dumping. We will issue advice, guidance, and warning letters where necessary and follow up with enforcement action if required.

Keeping our borough clean is a top priority for us and the Mayor of Tower Hamlets has recently announced a £2.1m funding to tackle fly-tipping and waste as well as boost recycling. The funding will mean additional staff to target fly-tippers, 200 new bins, more vehicles to collect waste and recycling, as well as supporting waste and recycling services to deal with growing levels of waste as the borough's population grows. This comes as part of our ongoing commitment to target litter and grime across the borough to make Tower Hamlets a cleaner, safer and fairer borough.

11.10 Question from Councillor Shah Ameen:

Residents in Tower Hamlets see crime and ASB as a priority in the borough. Can the Cabinet Member please provide me with an update on the work the Council has done in partnership with our colleagues in the police to tackle crime and ASB?

Response of Councillor Sirajul Islam, Cabinet Member for Community Safety:

Tower Hamlets Council is committed to tackling crime and ASB in our borough and our recent work with our partners in the Metropolitan Police and other external organisations shows great progress. I will provide an update on our most recent successes.

The council continues to provide council-funded police officers, known as the Partnership Task Force (PTF). Since April 2021 the PTF has undertaken more than 9,000 hours of uniformed patrols, issued nearly 200 antisocial behaviour warnings, conducted 376 stop and searches and made 53 detections for possession of drugs or possession with intent to supply.

The council's award-winning Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) team continues to offer support for victims of domestic abuse and improve women's safety, offering training sessions to encourage male allyship and reporting of abuse.

The council is also working to deliver its CCTV Transformation Programme, a £3.1million investment to upgrade the whole CCTV network to new digital

technology, which will increase visibility and allow the council to better support the police and tackle crime.

We also continue to have regular joint meetings with our partners to respond to emerging issues and problem locations, identifying required actions to satisfy local issues.

11.11 Question from Councillor Faroque Ahmed:

When are we going to see any improvements to Whitechapel markets?

Response of Motin Uz-Zaman, Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Work, Economic Growth and Faith:

The Council has initiated the Whitechapel Road Improvements Programme in response to the significant changes that are underway in the Whitechapel area, including the arrival of Crossrail and the relocation of the Council's Town Hall to the Old Royal London Hospital.

The Programme features three strands:

Firstly, Public Realm: enhancements to the quality, organisation and functionality of the footways to increase accessibility, wayfinding and safety, and clearly define spaces for different uses and activities.

Secondly, Market Stalls: Upgrading the market stall infrastructure to make them easier to use and improve the shopping environment.

And thirdly, Market Management: Determining a vision for the long-term success of the market and improving the day-to-day function of the market operation.

Combined, these changes will make a significant change to the area, with a range of benefits including the promotion of sustainable modes of movement to promote accessibility and safety, strengthening the market by supporting existing traders with new stalls infrastructure, reducing clutter and waste issues, promoting growth, and encouraging opportunities.

The Council has been working with landscape designers and architects to develop the proposals for the public realm and new market stalls, and held a public consultation between the 29th November 2021 and 9th January 2022 to gather the views of residents, businesses and visitors. Feedback from this consultation is now being considered by the design team to make amends to the designs, and begin to develop detailed proposals, with work on the southern footway expected to begin in the first half of 2022. Separately, a prototype market stall will be delivered in Summer 2022 to allow market traders to test the proposed design and provide detailed feedback to inform the final scheme. It is anticipated that work to the northern footway and the market stalls will take place in 2023.

In addition, the Council had carried out an extensive consultation for a Borough wide Markets Action plan that also includes a dedicated Whitechapel Action Plan. This is planned to launch in Quarter 2 2022 and run through to 2027. This will also bring forward a number of projects to improve Whitechapel Market.

For more information on the Programme, a dedicated webpage can be found on the Council's Let's Talk Tower Hamlets webpage at <https://talk.towerhamlets.gov.uk/wrip>

11.12 Question from Councillor Victoria Obaze:

Can the Mayor or Lead Member update us on the Mayor's High Street Clean Up?

Response of Councillor Asma Islam, Cabinet Member for Environment and Planning:

The project has already covered locations in Shadwell, Whitechapel, Limehouse, Spitalfields & Banglatown and Bethnal Green South delivering graffiti cleaning, jet washing, fly tip collection, litter picking and parking enforcement activity.

We have engaged with local businesses, community groups and residents.

In the first week it supported 20 businesses with Graffiti cleaning support, over 500m of pavement jet washed/day, 67 waste investigations (resulting in 12 section notices and 4 FPNs) and 10 fly tip filled cage vehicles.

The project has looked to identify damaged footways and street furniture, tidy up around markets, engage with specialist contractors to clean the roads and gullies around our Street Market Food Courts, and target on street utility providers to address defaced apparatus such as old phone boxes.

We'll continue to target these hotspots across the borough so we have a cleaner and greener Tower Hamlets.

11.13 Question from Councillor Bex White:

I have been involved in a handful of cases where people with young children are in temporary accommodation that is completely unsuitable, and the cabinet member has been helpful in dealing with these when I have raised these issues.

However I am concerned that for every case that comes to councillors there might be others who don't realise that there is help available, and are suffering at the hands of unfit landlords. I would like to know what criteria the council uses to assess the suitability of temporary accommodation and how can we be assured that people in crisis are not being forced into accommodation that is unsafe?

Response of Councillor Danny Hassell, Cabinet Member for Housing:

- We are committed to improving the quality and location of temporary accommodation.
- I recently visited new homes in Turin Street which will ensure that people who become homeless can have access to good quality temporary accommodation and help keep them close to their family and friends here in the borough.
- The council has extensive property standards criteria that it uses to procure temporary accommodation. The criteria covers a wide range of requirements such as location, property type, minimum floor space, kitchen and bathroom facilities, floor coverings, furniture, and more. All suppliers of TA are required to ensure that TA being offered meets the standards set out

- New suppliers providing properties for TA use for the first time are required to undergo inspections on their first 5 properties to ensure that they meet this standard.
- Where we have identified or been made aware of a property failing to meet the standards, this escalates to relevant managers in order to ensure that prompt action is taken right away. This may be a quick turnaround on remedial work that may have been overlooked or the immediate return of a property to the respective supplier.
- Suppliers for whom we receive a number of complaints (i.e. those consistently breaching the standards) are then required to have their properties inspected on each occasion again, until officers are satisfied that standards are being met.

11.14 Question from Councillor Tarik Khan:

Can the Cabinet Member please give us an update on the two food recycling pilots in the borough?

Response of Councillor Asma Islam, Cabinet Member for Environment and Planning:

We're committed to improving recycling rates across the borough, and we hope our food recycling pilot helps us achieve that.

The council's waste service is currently running a food waste pilot project in two locations in Tower Hamlets with the aim of testing logistics and engagement and costing a borough-wide food waste service rollout.

Preparatory work for the pilot began in May 2021, which included liaising with all stakeholders and the two sites, Besford and Dinmont, and The Bow Quarter.

Having pre-delivered the 5 litre in-door caddies and biodegradable food waste sacks to estate managers in early October, the project formally began in early November once the outdoor brown food waste bins were on site.

Leaflets explaining the process to residents were also delivered in November and posters supplied to place on notice boards.

The pilot is monitored every three weeks with site visits on a variety of days and times, along with regular contact with estate managers who provide resident feedback.

Feedback so far has been very positive, and we'll continue to review this before deciding on next steps.

11.15 Question from Councillor Marc Francis:

Will the lead member provide an update on the average waiting time for a housing OT assessment and the action being taken to reduce that to a more acceptable timeframe?

Response of Councillor Rachel Blake, Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Wellbeing:

There is a backlog of OT assessments - but we are taking action to clear this.

The service has worked hard so that a backlog of 155 cases in October 2021 has now been reduced to 55 cases. In the same period the earliest outstanding medical application date has been reduced from 12 to 5 months.

We will be clearing the rest of the backlog by end of April 2022 and then will put in place measures to complete medical OT assessments within an 8 week target.

I know how life changing OT improvements can be to our residents and we will continue our focus to reduced waiting times.

11.16 Question from Councillor Rabina Khan:

Will the Mayor commit to taking a Public Health approach in addressing knife and violent crime in the borough?

Response of Councillor Sirajul Islam, Cabinet Member for Community Safety:

Violent crime is a serious issue and a key priority area for the council. In 2018, the council and the community safety partnership adopted a public health approach to tackling violence.

We acknowledge that tackling violence requires a whole system approach and this is addressed not just by Tower Hamlets council, but in partnership with other key agencies such as the Metropolitan Police Service, public health and wider partners. This commitment has been embedded within the published Tower Hamlets Community Safety Partnership Plan 2021-24: focusing on early intervention and prevention, and the wider determinants of crime and community safety to address violence locally.