

Community Engagement

Evaluation report

04/09/2023



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Introduction

The work that the Council delivers has a direct impact on the lives of people who live, work, and visit Tower Hamlets. Community engagement happens when residents are able to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.

The Council has an ambition to create a Council that 'listens and works for everyone' because it will result in better decision-making on policy and practice and the Councils work will be more likely to receive community support.

This will not happen without effective community engagement. Therefore, the Council is currently working with internal and external stakeholders to develop a new Community Engagement Strategy.

In support the development of a new strategy, we have conducted an evaluation to review how well the Council is currently delivering community engagement and identify areas for improvement.

This report provides our assessment of the Council's current strengths and areas for improvement and recommendations on how the Council can further improve community engagement in the future.

Executive Summary

The Council is currently in the process of developing a new Community Engagement Strategy. To support the development of the strategy, we conducted an evaluation to identify how well the Council is currently delivering community engagement and identify areas for improvement.

We gathered evidence for the evaluation by:

- Reading and reviewing corporate documents
- Conducting interviews and surveys with officers
- Focus groups with Divisional Leadership Teams (DLTs)
- A workshop with partners.

Our view is that the Council has clear areas of strengths for delivering community engagement and there are pockets of good practice to build on. There are also significant areas of weakness but encouragingly officers can identify the areas for improvement.

The Council at all levels spoke passionately about the importance of community engagement for achieving better outcomes for Tower Hamlets, and there is a desire to improve practice in the future. There are lots of impressive recent examples of how community engagement being used to inform policy and practice, and it's clear the Council has effective partnerships in place.

However, there is no coordinated approach to identify and plan for community engagement opportunities, involvement in community engagement is often not representative of the community, and the impact of resident's involvement is not fed back to them effectively. Perhaps the biggest issue we identified is insufficient resources to deliver effective community engagement consistently.

Based on the findings of this evaluation our summarised recommendations are to:

- Develop a new community engagement strategy and plan for delivering it
- Better planning and coordination of community engagement activity
- Improve partnership working to enable effective community engagement to happen
- Ensure the residents involved in community engagement are reflective of the Tower Hamlets community
- Equip the workforce with the necessary knowledge and skills to deliver community engagement effectively
- Increase opportunities for the Council and residents to work together to design policies and services
- Let residents know about the impact their involvement has had on policy and practice

Methodology

To conduct the evaluation we used a quality framework. The framework is a development tool that outlines what good practice in community engagement looks like by using a set of standards and indicators, enabling us to assess the Council's strengths and weaknesses, and to identify areas for improvement.

The 8 quality standards that we used are:

- **Vision & Strategy** - There is a clearly stated vision for community engagement and a strategy, supported by clear objectives to deliver it.
- **Participation** - There is a consistent approach to ensuring residents can have a say in the decisions that affect them.
- **Equality, diversity and inclusion** - The residents involved in community engagement reflect the makeup of the range of communities in Tower Hamlets.
- **Resources** - There are adequate resources to deliver community engagement processes effectively.
- **Workforce** - The workforce has the necessary skills, knowledge, and capabilities to deliver high quality community engagement.
- **Partnerships** - There are partnerships in place at all levels that enable effective community engagement to take place.
- **Leadership** - Senior leaders and managers are champions for community engagement.
- **Learning and impact** – Community engagement has had an impact on policy and practice.

Conducting the maturity assessment

The Council worked with the 'Community Engagement Strategy – Project Group' to conduct the evaluation. To do the evaluation we gathered information from the following sources:

Reading and reviewing corporate documents, including the:

- Strategic Plan 2022-2026
- Communications Strategy 2022-2025
- Statement of Community Involvement

Surveys / Interviews with Council services, including:

- Strategy & Improvement
- Public Health
- Young People's Service

- Strategy and Communities
- Communications
- Children and Culture (Strategy, Policy and Improvement)
- Health, Adults and Communities (Strategy, Policy, and Improvement)
- Tower Hamlets Homes
- Planning Services
- Citizenship & Immigration Services

1 X workshop with external organisations. The participation organisations included:

- Tower Hamlets Council for Voluntary Services (THCVS)
- Healthwatch Tower Hamlets
- Women's Inclusive Team
- North East London CCG
- Coffee Afrique
- Tower Hamlets GP Care Group
- Social Action for Health
- Global Learning London

Workshops with Council divisional leaderships teams (DLTs), including:

- Resources
- Place
- Chief Executives
- Childrens and Culture
- Health, Adults and Communities

Interviews with officers who have been involved in community engagement activities, including:

- Emily Fieran-Reed
- Employment and skills SMT
- Idea Store Leadership Team

Developing recommendations

Once we had gathered the information, we collated it using a tool called 'how are we doing?' The tool has a table for each of the standards, and within the table there are sections to assess 'where are you now' and 'what needs to improve?'

We analysed the information gathered and used it to make judgements on how well the Council is currently delivering community engagement. To make these judgements, we scored each standard using the following scale:

- **Established** - good overall performance against the standard
- **Aspiring** - some good performance, but also some gaps
- **Emerging** - not there yet, but you're able to identify areas for improvement

Finally, to shape the recommendations we presented the analysis and findings from the evaluation to the project team and came up with ideas on how to improve community engagement in the future.

Analysis & Findings

Standard	Vision & Strategy: There is a clearly stated vision for community engagement and a strategy, supported by clear objectives, to deliver it.
Level	Aspiring
Where are you now?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council’s Strategic Plan 2022-26 has a corporate priority to create a ‘a council that listens and works for communities.’ • The 2023/24 delivery plan for the Strategic Plan has a number of commitments linked to community engagement. They are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ensure consultations are conducted at a point which allows residents and stakeholders to influence decision-making. ○ Work with residents, community groups and other interested parties to develop plans and ideas together. ○ Carry out consultation which is fair and worthwhile, on the basis of the ‘Gunning Principles’ devised by Stephen Sedley QC. ○ Ensure that everyone affected by any proposals will be notified and can have their say. ○ Hold regular Q&A sessions around the borough so that we can have a discussion, together, about how my administration is doing on the important issues. • However, the Council’s previous Community Engagement Strategy expired in 2021 meaning there is no clearly stated vision for community engagement or strategy for achieving it. • The Council is in the process of working with internal and external stakeholders to develop a new Community Engagement Strategy and delivery plan, due to be launched in April 2024. • Some Council services have a vision or strategy for community engagement which is relevant to their service area. Examples include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Tower Hamlets Homes - Resident Engagement Strategy 2021- 26 ○ Planning service - Statement of Community Involvement ○ Young Tower Hamlets – currently developing Participation Strategy • There are objectives or emphasis on community engagement in several Council’s strategies and plans. This includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2021-25 ○ Communications Strategy 2022-25 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The Charter within the Children & Families Plan ○ HAC division’s workplan for 2023/24 ○ Tower Hamlets VAWG Strategy 2019-2024 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There is a strong understanding of the importance of involving communities in the decisions that affect them across all levels of the Council. ● There is different understanding of what community engagement is amongst Council officers. Some officers believe it means all contact with resident’s whilst others refer to resident involvement in decision-making.
Areas of improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To work with internal and external stakeholders to develop a vision for community engagement and a strategic plan to deliver it. ● Agree upon a definition of what community engagement means and be clear on the reasons why the Council wants to engage more effectively with residents. ● Embed the Council’s vision for community engagement in other key corporate policies, strategies and plans that guide the council’s work. ● Establish a working group with officers from relevant departments to monitor, review and revise the engagement strategy when it is finished.

Standard	Participation: There is a consistent approach to ensuring citizens can have a say in the decisions that affect them.
Level:	Aspiring
Where are you now?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The results from the Annual Residents survey show that residents feeling of being able to be involved or influence decision making has declined. ● There is no Council-wide approach to identify and plan for opportunities for community engagement and to put in place plans to involve residents. ● Opportunities for community engagement are usually identified within services or because there is a statutory responsibility to consult. ● The Communications Service is developing a database of contacts to reach out to residents for community engagement purposes. ● Services usually identify the stakeholders to involve in engagement process by reaching out to groups they have relationships with. 	

- There are varying levels of engagement with residents taking place across the different council services. Some examples of community engagement include:
 - Delivering a hackathon with residents to co-design the Young Tower Hamlets Service.
 - Pre-application engagement with local residents for the Millharbour Village proposed development which included contacting 5000 local residents to attend events and workshops.
- Different approaches are being used by services to carry out community engagement and consultations including:
 - Utilising 'Lets Talk Tower Hamlets' platform – the council's digital consultation platform - where residents, businesses and stakeholders can comment on live consultations being undertaken.
 - Workshops and focus groups with residents, young people, community organisations and equality networks.
 - Surveys and questionnaires.
 - Engaging residents through commissioning of VCS organisations to deliver specific services.
 - Engaging different boards, forums where there is representation of local residents i.e. SEND improvement Board.
 - Peer research.
 - 'You said, we did' format has been used by different services to provide feedback to residents. In some directorates senior managers promote the use of this method and it has been a feature of reports to boards and forums and within annual reports. It's however not clear what methods are being used to convey the information.
- The Health Determinants Research Consortium (HDRC) is developing opportunities for resident participation in research.
- Through the HDRC programme and Corporate Strategy a community insight repository is planned to be developed that is live and affords opportunities for two way communication, including feedback to community groups.
- Despite various approaches used by services there appears to be limited face-to-face engagement with residents. Whilst digital engagement is important, face to face also builds transparency and better relations creating 'a council presence' for communities.
- THH engagement strategy incorporates 3 levels of involvement: high, medium and low levels. There are different engagement options available for residents within each of these levels.
- The Communications service is developing the Residents panel, which has 500 people who can be consulted by different services.
- There is a clear desire at all levels of the organisation to co-produce, co-

design services with communities, and there are some examples of this taking place:

- Corporate Strategy and Communities Team co-designing the Small Grants application process.
- Coproduction of culturally appropriate communication messages for the Covid spring vaccination which used co-production methodology with local CVS groups.
- However, co-production is not yet embedded as a way of working across the Council and many officers express a desire to develop their knowledge and skills in this area.
- There is evidence of consultation fatigue for being over consulted which means residents are not willing to always engage in consultations.
- No evidence has been provided of process for monitoring the involvement of residents either across the Council or within services.

Areas of improvement

- Create a corporate approach to identifying the opportunities to engage with communities and put plans in place. This could be through creating a forward plan of engagement opportunities.
- Ensure the Council is aware of their statutory duties to consult and there are plans in place to meet requirements.
- Develop best practice guides with accompanying templates to support officers when planning and preparing for engagement processes including ways to better engage on very technical documents that are important, but not easy to digest.
- Create a database with contacts of key stakeholders who the Council can reach out to when conducting engagement activities.
- Ensure that the Council engages with a diverse range of people and is not always speaking to the same 'usual suspects.'
- Increase knowledge and skills of the workforce of different methods and approaches on how to engage communities effectively.
- More face-to-face engagement with communities to ensure we are reaching more residents and residents from all sections of the community.
- Ensure there is stronger collaboration between the Communications service and community engagement work.
- Enable more opportunities for co-producing policies and services where policy makers can come together with service users to come up with solutions together.
- Explore opportunities to better utilise council's own assets where communities feel comfortable to talk to the council in their local areas.

Standard	Equality, diversity, and inclusion: The residents involved in decision-making reflect the makeup of the range of communities in Tower Hamlets.
Level	Aspiring
Where are you now?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council has information on the makeup of its communities, for example through census data. • There is some information on the voluntary and community sector partners through Tower Hamlets Connect and subscription to the VCS newsletter. • There is limited evidence of mapping taking place to understand the make-up of the local population and range of groups in Tower Hamlets to inform community engagement activity. • There is evidence that many services identify priority groups when delivering community engagement to ensure a representative group of residents are involved. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The Corporate Strategy and Communities Service has commissioned an Equalities Hub, with seven networks aligned to protected characteristics who can be consulted on issues. ○ THH collect equalities data when doing their Satisfaction Survey programme and use it to understand perceptions and feedback based on key equalities strands. ○ Childrens and Culture Division uses Equality analysis and data within performance reports to help inform their understanding of communities and steer engagement work. ○ The Planning Service identify and consider how to engage with hard-to-reach groups ahead of Local Plan consultation. ○ Some of the established Council forums are representative of the make-up of the Borough such as Youth council and Parents and Carers Council • The Council has an Equalities Impact Assessment form which is used to identify the impacts of new policies and strategies on those with protected characteristics. • However, there is no consistent approach to identifying barriers to residents taking part in engagement processes. • Some services have done work to understand the barriers that might stop residents for engaging and put in place solutions. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The Communications Service has a Bengali press officer and has Somali and Bengali pages in our Eastend. ○ Public health commissions specific work with priority groups or groups with protected characteristics. 	

- Some of the common barrier's that officers have seen that stop residents taking part include:
 - Language
 - Digital access
 - Power dynamics
- There is acknowledgement from different services that community engagement taking place often doesn't reflect the makeup of Tower Hamlets population.
- Most services provide remuneration as standard practice when there is budget in place to support it.
- There are potentially barriers to adopting a Council wide remuneration policy because the Department for Work and Pensions rules can mean that expenses and incentives can affect people's benefits.
- Due to need, some services have adopted their own policies and initiatives. For example:
 - A remuneration policy is being developed for the HDRC.
 - Development of Children and Safeguarding Young Scrutineers. Their role will be to challenge the priority groups to ensure the voice of the child and young person is at the centre of the work, and link with pre-established youth engagement groups for feedback on the work

Areas of improvement

- Better understand the make-up of Tower Hamlets communities so there is clarity on what a representative sample of people would look like in community engagement.
- Continue to build the database of contacts for organisations who have links with diverse communities who the Council can engage with.
- Equality Impact analysis need to be consistently conducted for any community engagement activity.
- Develop best practice guides with accompanying templates that focus on removing barriers to participation to support officers when planning and preparing for engagement.
- Conduct research into the barriers stopping residents from participating and provide guidance on how to put in place solutions so everyone can participate.
- Agree a remuneration policy that covers how the Council pays expenses, and recognises and rewards residents' participation. Explore whether remuneration for engagement is appropriate for all types of engagement. particularly statutory engagement. Does this also potentially risk people not responding to non-remunerated engagement?

Standard	Resources: There are adequate resources to deliver engagement processes effectively
Level	Emerging
Where are you now?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council does not have a dedicated community engagement service who coordinate community engagement activity. • Most services don't have a dedicated budget for community engagement. The budget predominately usually comes from existing staff time or individual team budgets. • However, some services do have a budget from community engagement, including Tower Hamlets Homes and Young Tower Hamlets. • Where there is a statutory requirement to consult, such as the Local Plan or major works, the budget for community engagement purposes is built into the project costs. • A lack of a dedicated community engagement team means that often community engagement processes are an add on to existing work, which can make it difficult to achieve quality. • Officers who have led community engagement activities feel they can be put under pressure to get work completed, meaning there is inadequate time to do meaningful engagement. • There is no Council guidance on how to deliver effective community engagement. • There are various tools and guides on engagement being used by different teams for example Tower Hamlets Homes has their own toolkit. • The Council has a contract with the Consultation Institute who can provide training and advice and guidance to the council on community engagement. 	
Areas of improvement	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore options for creating a community engagement team that coordinates community engagement and works with divisions to improve quality across the council. • Explore whether there can be a community engagement lead in each division to coordinate community engagement. • Better forward planning on community engagement to ensure there is adequate time and budget to deliver it effectively. • Develop a how to guide and template which provides information on how to deliver community engagement effectively. 	

Standard	Workforce: The workforce has the necessary skills, knowledge and capabilities to deliver high quality community engagement
Level	Emerging
Where are you now?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most services in the Council don't yet have a lead for community engagement. However, some services who engage with communities extensively have staff who have a lot of experience in engagement. • There hasn't been any work to consider what the essential knowledge, skills, and capabilities the Council workforce needs to deliver effective community engagement. • The Council commissioned the Consultation Institute to deliver training sessions to members and officers on effective community engagement. • There is no other Council wide training on community engagement. Although some services have organised training for staff. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ In Childrens and Culture they have trained staff in co-production methods and approaches at whole Directorate events. 	
Areas of improvement	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the knowledge, skills and capabilities that officers need to have to deliver community engagement effectively. • Organise learning opportunities for relevant staff so they can develop their knowledge, skills, and capabilities. • Explore the option of having community engagement leads in each division to enable better coordination between different services. • Ensure the job descriptions of key roles include key skills and a commitment to community engagement. 	

Standard	Partnerships: There are partnerships in place at all levels that enable effective community engagement to take place.
Level	Aspiring
Where are you now?	

- [Tower Hamlets Strategic Partnership](#) brings together key stakeholders to improve services and outcomes for residents. It aims to provide residents with opportunities to shape, influence and inform the development of the borough's main partnership plans.
- There are effective partnerships in place with the voluntary and community sector. The Council has a [Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy](#) which is a partnership strategy.
- The Council coordinates 'Cooperate' which is a strategic partnership board for the voluntary and community sector.
- The Communications Service is developing a database of key contacts which the council can engage with in the future.
- The Corporate Strategy and Communities Service commission the [Equalities Hubs](#), which consist of seven networks, with a network for each protected characteristic. Different council services work with these networks on issues affecting them.
- Services across the council demonstrated that they are aware of the key stakeholders who they need to engage with when developing policies, strategies, and plans.
- There are lots of examples of working effectively with partners to ensure the voice of residents is heard. For example:
 - Working with Tower Hamlets Council for Voluntary Services to deliver engagement events to design the Mayors Community Grants Programme.
 - Corporate Parenting Board each of which has community representatives who are actively involved in the work of the boards
 - SEND Improvement Board, these boards produce an annual report including plans for community engagement.
- There is no evidence of communicating with partners about community engagement activities to explore options for joining up and to avoid duplication.
- Council officers from Corporate Strategy & Communities are members of networks that support community engagement. These include:
 - Tower Hamlets Connect has a lead community engagement officers group.
 - London Policy and Strategy Network
 - London Engagement Collaborative: A cross-sector community of practice on engagement led by the GLA
- Internally there is not a working group of officers involved in community engagement. The Childrens division and Public Health have set up a network of officers involved in participation.

Areas of improvement

- Identify the officers within the council who have responsibility for community engagement and establish a network.
- Better coordinate community engagement activities across the council to spot opportunities for partnership working and to avoid duplication.
- Create a database with contacts of key stakeholders who the Council can reach out to when conducting community engagement activities.
- Engage more with local businesses as they are key stakeholders in the borough and often Tower Hamlets residents.
- Share information about community engagement activities with strategic partners to identify opportunities for joined up working, avoid duplication and share learning.

Standard	Leadership: Senior leaders and managers are champions for community engagement.
Level	Embedded
Where are you now?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community engagement is central to the Council’s strategic plan. There is a corporate priority for a ‘council that listens and works for everyone.’ • There is a priority within the Councils annual delivery plan to develop a new community engagement strategy. • The Mayor and Chief Executive have made public commitments to community engagement. However, communication of these could be amplified in the future. • The mayor has asked officers to improve consultation at the Mayors Advisory Board and to ensure the Council is engaging with all sections of the community. • There is evidence of senior managers from some directorates and leaders attending community engagement events. 	
Areas of improvement	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore how Council communications can be used to promote the importance of community engagement. 	

Standard	Learning and impact: Community engagement has had an impact on policy and practice
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Level	Emerging
Where are you now?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examples have been provided as to how Community engagement has an impact on policy and practice across the Council. For example Public Health’s work with disabled residents to identify barriers disabled people had understanding Covid-19 information and they co-produced solutions. • There are examples of the results of community engagement being recorded and promoted. However, this is not always commonplace. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Public Health has plan to create community insight repository that is live and affords opportunities for two-way communication, including feedback to community groups. ○ The Strategic lead for Young Tower Hamlets Service is accountable to the Youth Council so also obliged to provide feedback to them in the development of the new service. • ‘You said we did’ is the format most often used by different services for feed back to participants about their involvement. • There is little evidence of feedback being conducted face-to-face either online or in-person, so it is not clear if the information is reaching the residents. • Feedback, when not messaged well, can be counterproductive, which can upset participants because people feel nothing has come from it, even if it has. • There is not a systematic approach to evaluating community engagement approaches in the council, although some services do evaluate and reflect on their community engagement. • There is no evidence of producing case studies or delivering presentations to colleagues to share the insights from community engagement processes internally. 	
Areas of improvement	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council should identify and use effective methods to inform the people who have taken part about the impact that their input has made on tangible action. • The Council should also be honest about things it can’t implement and explain the reasons why. • Time should be built into community engagement projects to reflect and evaluate, to enable continuous improvement. • Learning of projects that went well and not well should be captured and shared internally using case studies and learning sessions. • Residents should be made aware of the influence their contribution can have on decisions at the outset. 	

Recommendations

Develop a new community engagement strategy and plan for delivering it

Better planning and coordination of community engagement activity

- Create a corporate approach to identifying the opportunities to engage with communities and put plans in place by creating an annual forward plan.
- Identify the officers within the Council and divisions who have responsibility for community engagement and establish a network to improve communication.

Improve partnership working to enable effective community engagement to happen

- Create a database with contacts of key stakeholders who the Council can reach out to when conducting engagement activities.
- Share information about community engagement activities with strategic partners to identify opportunities for joined up working, avoid duplication, and share learning.

Ensure the residents involved in community engagement are reflective of the Tower Hamlets community

- Better understand the make-up of Tower Hamlets communities so there is clarity on what a representative sample of people would look like in community engagement.
- Conduct research into the barriers stopping residents from participating and provide guidance on how to put in place solutions so everyone can participate.
- Start using the Equality Impact analysis form when planning and preparing for community engagement activity.
- Agree a remuneration policy that covers how the Council pays expenses and recognises and rewards residents' participation. Explore whether remuneration for engagement is appropriate for all types of engagement, particularly statutory engagement.

Equip the workforce with the necessary knowledge and skills to deliver community engagement effectively

- Identify the knowledge, skills and capabilities that officers need to have to deliver community engagement effectively.
- Organise learning opportunities for relevant staff so they can develop their knowledge, skills, and capabilities.

- Develop a how to guides on how to deliver effective community engagement with accompanying templates.

Create adequate resources to deliver engagement processes effectively

- Explore options for creating a community engagement team that coordinates community engagement and works with divisions to improve quality across the council.
- Explore whether there can be a community engagement lead in each division to coordinate community engagement.
- Explore options for a budget to support important community engagement activities.

Increase opportunities for the Council and service users to work together to design policies and services

- Understand the ways the communities can be involved in the decisions that affect them and identify more opportunities where residents can be involved in decision-making.
- Enable more opportunities for co-producing policies and services where policy makers can come together with service users to come up with solutions together.
- Use council assets more effectively to engage with communities.

Let residents know about the impact their involvement has had on policy and practice

- Explore how Council communications can be used to promote the importance of community engagement to officers.
- Identify and use effective methods to inform the people who have taken part about the impact that their input has made.
- Explore options for how the community and partners can hold the Council to account on the delivery of the Community Engagement Strategy.