

Tower Hamlets Overview & Scrutiny Committee Annual Report 2023/24



Chair's Foreword

I am pleased to present the Annual Report for 2023/24. This report reflects the diligent efforts of the Committee and its Sub-Committees over the past year, as we continue to ensure transparency, accountability, and the delivery of essential services for the residents of Tower Hamlets.



**Cllr Musthak Ahmed,
Chair of Overview and
Scrutiny Committee**

This year has been one of both challenges and opportunities for the Council and our residents. As our community continued to grapple with the rising cost of living, we scrutinised the Council's response to these pressures and sought to ensure that support is reaching those most in need. Our commitment to addressing these financial challenges is mirrored in our broader scrutiny activities, where we robustly reviewed budget proposals and worked to ensure that all Council services are efficient, equitable, and responsive to the changing needs of our residents.

In addition to focusing on financial pressures, we have prioritised new key strategies to tackle some of the most pressing issues facing our borough. This includes our work on combatting drugs, the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)

strategy and Community Engagement strategy.

We have worked closely with key stakeholders to drive impactful change and hold decision-makers accountable. We engaged with the Mayor, Chief Executive, Borough Commander, and other vital partners to ensure decisions, new strategies and resident's concerns were addressed robustly and effectively implemented on the ground.

We also performed key reviews on childhood healthy weight, disabled residents' access to sports, social landlord performance and support for markets and traders.

I would like to sincerely thank all members of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, Sub-Committees, and the wider Council for their dedication and

hard work throughout the year. I am also grateful to the residents and community groups who have participated in our scrutiny processes, offering valuable insights and perspectives that have enriched our discussions and outcomes.

Looking ahead, we remain committed to continuing our work in holding the Council to account and driving forward improvements. We will persist in addressing the challenges faced by our borough, ensuring that the services provided by the Council meet the highest standards and deliver positive outcomes for all.

Scrutiny Members' Workshop 2023-24



Overview & Scrutiny Committee

The OSC work programme played a pivotal role this year in ensuring robust governance and accountability across key areas of the Council's work, aligning with the strategic priorities of the borough. The Committee has also been working hard this year to ensure that the Council and its leaders are held accountable and that decisions are made in the best interests of our community.

Strategic Accountability: The committee conducted focused engagements with senior leadership, including the Mayor, Chief Executive, and Borough Commander, to rigorously assess their performance and decision-making processes, reinforcing the importance of accountability in leadership. Discussions with the Borough Commander included a focus on Women's safety and women from the borough were invited to discuss their lived experience with the Borough Commander and Committee members.

Addressing Community Priorities: OSC dedicated substantial efforts to address key areas of residents concern, including parking management, the borough's response to the climate emergency, and measures to mitigate the impact of the cost of living crisis. These spotlights were designed to ensure that council actions are responsive

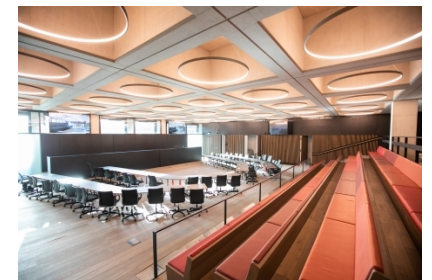
and aligned with resident priorities. In scrutinising the impact of cost of living, the Committee invited advice agencies and voluntary groups to discuss the challenges residents face and further support needed.

Review of Service Provision: Critical evaluations were undertaken on significant Council initiatives, such as the in-sourcing of leisure services and the implementation of the Mayor's Community Grants Programme. These reviews were instrumental in ensuring that service delivery enhancements are effectively meeting the needs of our diverse community. The Committee will continue to monitor the performance of the leisure service and will also ensure the Grants programme has the intended impact.

Scrutiny of Budget and Policy Frameworks: Comprehensive reviews were conducted on a range of budgetary and policy documents,

including the Youth Justice Annual Plan, Local Plan, Licensing Policy, and budget proposals. The committee's scrutiny ensured that these frameworks are not only fiscally responsible but also strategically aligned with the borough's long-term objectives and are driving improvements for residents.

Ongoing Performance Monitoring: Through the quarterly review of performance and financial monitoring reports, the committee maintained vigilant oversight of the council's operational efficiency and effectiveness, ensuring that strategic goals are being met and resources are optimally utilised.



OSC carefully examined the council's budget for 2024-25 to ensure money is being spent wisely and vital services are protected, especially during these tough times when funding for local authorities is uncertain and many are facing significant financial challenges. The Committee's discussion emphasised the importance of financial resilience, inclusivity, and the need to protect our most vulnerable residents

We comprehensively examined the budget, its allocations, and the strategic decisions made to navigate key challenges, capitalise on opportunities, and steer Tower Hamlets towards a financially resilient future

OSC acknowledged several positive initiatives in the budget. The Committee is encouraged by the continued investment in Educational Maintenance Allowance and University Bursaries, the introduction of free swimming for women and girls over 16 and men over 55, funding for a Women's Resource Centre, and the creation of a Council Tax Cost of Living Relief Fund. In addition to this, the budget will support investment in a Somali Resource Hub, a culturally sensitive adult care home, a culturally sensitive Drug Misuse

Budget Scrutiny

Treatment Centre, and an Institute of Academic Excellence.

We were also pleased with the reduced reliance on reserves and the detailed savings plans provided as part of the budget proposals.

The Committee highlighted risks, particularly around income generation, housing pressures, and the need for strong governance to ensure budget delivery. We made several recommendations to help preserve and enhance essential services that our community relies on and mitigate financial challenges they face.

Supporting Waste Services:

We're pushing for the Council to ensure that the £5 million investment in waste services is sustainable and truly benefits and

improves our neighbourhoods. We want to receive regular updates to understand the impact of the funding.

Affordable Housing: With rent prices rising, we recommended that the Council puts a cap on rent increases—so residents won't pay more than £10 extra per week.

Parking Permits: We know every penny counts, so we've asked the council to reconsider proposed increases in resident parking permits to avoid putting more financial pressure on you.

Helping the Most Vulnerable: We're advocating for additional resources to be directed towards supporting those most in need, ensuring that everyone has access to help when they need it.

Health & Adults Sub Committee

The Health and Adults Scrutiny Sub-Committee have focused key community issues and ones that impact our most vulnerable residents including primary and acute care



This year the Sub-Committee focussed its scrutiny energy on key community and public health issues.

The Sub-Committee examined some of the challenges on hospital waiting times for elective surgery and the pressures on accident and emergency services and the impact this had on residents particularly post covid and with the industrial action. The Sub-Committee also considered the accessibility and publicity of the local community diagnostic services and what more needs to be done.

The Sub-Committee considered the public health report on low take up for certain type of cancer screening such as bowel cancers and called upon NHS cancer screening programme to understand the significance of this and what actions were being undertaken to remedy this, in particular the level of comms investment to reach

out to groups whose first language is not English.

A key focus for the Sub-Committee was the level of support for disabled people in accessing health services from primary care to acute care. The Sub-Committee heard crucial evidence from some of the residents living with autism about the challenges they face particularly becoming frustrated in getting themselves understood within health services and wanted to see changes in attitudes towards autism.

The Sub-Committee reviewed the proposed housing with care strategy and as part of the wider transformation project and evidence gathering, members carried out a site visit to on how assisted technology can help people with disabilities live independently. The Sub-Committee also reviewed out of hours GP services in Tower Hamlets particularly around access for vulnerable

residents and invited the GP Care Group to give evidence.

The Sub-Committee called upon local residents and community services that provided support with maternity to understand their experiences and challenges they faced. The Sub-Committee also followed up with the service to scrutinise how the service was responding to barriers particularly for Black African, Somali, Caribbean and Bangladeshi women around language barriers and timely access to maternity care.



Health & Adults Sub Committee



Finally, as the council opted to insource leisure, the Sub-Committee carried out a deep dive to examine disability and those living with long-term ill health conditions access to sports and exercise. Sub-Committee members also carried out a number of site visits to the local leisure centres, carried out engagement with residents from the council's commissioned services such as disability people's network and older peoples reference group to understand their needs and views. The Sub-Committee heard evidence from local community gyms such as Ability Bow and gathered further expert intelligence from Alternative Movement, Disability Sports Coach and local disability advocacy champions like REAL.

The Sub-Committee produced a number of recommendations which suggested improvements on

disability representation, better data driven evidence on disability access and usage, developing trusted disability communication, develop a disability forum, collaboration with key partners, Primary Care, NHS and voluntary and community sector and creating transitional arrangements to mainstream facilities.



Cllr Ahmodur Khan, Chair of Health and Adults Scrutiny Sub-Committee



Children's & Education Sub-Committee

The Children's & Education Committee had a productive year, holding five committee meetings, a challenge session on Child healthy weight and site visits to secondary schools.

A key focus of the Sub-Committee has been on Schools and Education, with items focusing on:

- **Universal Free School Meals for all secondary school pupils**

Tower Hamlets is the first local authority in the UK to introduce this and members reviewed the implementation of this policy, making recommendations on how to maximise accessibility and uptake.

- **Provision for those with Special Educational Needs**

The rapid increase in children requiring additional support is a key concern, having negatively impacted on key performance measures. Members were pleased to hear about the work

going on in schools to support children with additional needs, but the issue remains a key concern for the committee moving into 2024-25.

- **The impact of PFI contracts on schools**

Schools expressed their concerns, and challenges managing budgets in the face of declining child population, and increasing costs linked to these contracts. The committee will continue to monitor this issue.

Committee members carried out site visits to five schools in the borough focusing on the above items, speaking to pupils and teachers and even sampling some School Meals.



Cllr Bodrul Choudhury, Chair of Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee

Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub Committee

The Housing & Regeneration Sub-Committee had a met five meetings and held challenge session



Cllr Abdul Mannan
Chair of Housing and
Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-
Committee

The Sub-Committee looked at the performance of registered housing providers on several occasions throughout the year by examining key performance data, such as repairs response times and complaint handling, and their performance against the targets that were set, and questioned the Tower Hamlets Housing Forum on how the data will drive forward improvements for residents of the borough.

The Sub-Committee also met with residents of registered housing provided to hear their concerns about housing services in the borough.

The Sub-Committee reviewed the impact of new legislation such as Renters Reform Bill and the Social Housing Regulation Act on the borough.

Following up on the Fire Safety scrutiny review in 2021, the Sub-Committee examined the progress made on the Fire Safety Action Plan and reviewed the impact in this borough of new legislation, such as the Building Safety Act 2022 and the Higher-Risk Building Regulations 2023, and the council's schemes to incorporate this new legislation on building schemes already underway and how the council's building control authorities will enforce their new powers.

The Sub-Committee also reviewed the council's Homelessness Strategy and examined what is being done to provide homeless people with accommodation.

The Sub-Committee also scrutinised the Mayor on several

key policies such as

- Progress toward meeting the climate net zero targets
- Progress on building 1000 new homes per year
- Bringing Tower Hamlets Homes back inhouse.

Environment & Community Safety



As the Scrutiny Lead for Environment & Community Safety, led on the OSC annual Borough Commander Spotlight to review delivery, achievements and policing priorities for 2024/25.

Following on from my focus on women's safety in the previous year, the session spotlighted local female residents to share their lived-experiences and potential solutions to community safety concerns with the Committee and Borough Commander.

The Committee also engaged the Borough Commander on the lack of resourcing within neighbourhood policing, abstraction of dedicated ward officers, and progress made in recruiting a diverse workforce in the MPS.

Additionally, scrutiny focused on policy development in key areas of

the environment and community safety portfolio, feeding into the new Combatting Drugs Partnership Strategy and Parking Enforcement Plan.

Scrutiny also reviewed the refresh of the Violence Against Women and Girl's Strategy and I held the Community Safety Team to account on ensuring the recommendations made from my previous challenge session on Women's Safety was integrated into the strategy.

Scrutiny also reviewed the councils progress to becoming a carbon neutral council by 2025, examining the approach to offsetting carbon, use of the net zero fund, and the impact caused by newly insourced services such as Tower Hamlets Home and the Leisure Centres.





Scrutiny in Action:
Empowering Disabled Residents:
Accessible Sports and Fitness
Initiatives

Empowering Disabled Residents: Accessible Sports and Fitness Initiatives



The Health and Adults Scrutiny Sub-Committee used the resident feedback from the HASSC work programme to consider undertaking a deep dive on equality issues for people with disability and long-term ill health conditions.



The Sub-Committee was aware that the Council's objective was to insource leisure and that this would be an opportunity for the Sub-Committee to review of some the accessibility practices provide by the local leisure services for people with disabilities.



The Sub-Committee carried out a resident stakeholder engagement event inviting residents from the Disability People's Network (Apasen) and the Older People Reference (Age UK) to provide their views. Members of HASSC also undertook site visits to the local leisure centres (managed by former provider GLL) and some local

community gyms that specialised in support for disability and people living with long-term ill health conditions such as Ability Bow.

The Sub-Committee also sought the views of local advocacy champions such as REAL and engaged with sports provision providers for people with disabilities such as Vallance Community Sports Association. Members also invited expert witnesses such as Disability Sports Coaching and Alternative Movement that specialise in exercise programmes for people with disabilities. The Sub-Committee also scrutinise and sought assurance from the council's insourcing leisure project team and through the discussion the committee made the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Disability representation - The council should actively prioritise initiatives that will enhance visibility and

representation of people with disabilities and or those living with long-term ill health conditions within the leisure sports and fitness centre workforce

Recommendation 2: Better data driven evidence on disability access and usage
The council should develop a comprehensive approach to the collection and analysis of disability access and usage led data that supports good governance and drives continuous improvements

Empowering Disabled Residents: Accessible Sports and Fitness Initiatives



Recommendation 3: Developing trusted disability communication channels and campaigns
The council should engage community disability groups to co-design and develop robust campaigns that promotes physical activity and sports for people with disabilities and long-term health conditions

Recommendation 4: Create a sports and exercise disability forum that embeds a person-centred philosophy and empowers residents with disabilities and or those living with long-term health conditions to review provision and make recommendations for improvement. The council should work with disability groups and establish a sports and exercise disability forum that empowers residents with disabilities or those living with long-term ill health



conditions to undertake activities such as accessibility audits on facilities, customer service, equipment, programmes to deliver on improvements.

Recommendation 5: Collaboration with primary care, NHS and healthcare partners and voluntary and community sector The council's leisure service should establish joint working protocols with primary care, NHS, health partners and voluntary and community sector to support widening access and become a partner referral provider for people with disabilities and or long-term health conditions.

Recommendation 6: Creating transitional arrangements from specialised fitness gyms to mainstream leisure centre facilities
The council should establish joint work

protocols with community gyms (specialist in disability and long-term ill health condition) to support residents with disabilities and or those living with long-term ill health conditions to make the transition into mainstream leisure centre facilities.

[Health and Adults Scrutiny Sub-Committee Report \(towerhamlets.gov.uk\)](https://towerhamlets.gov.uk/health-and-adults-scrutiny-sub-committee-report)



Scrutiny in Action: Child Healthy Weight

Child Healthy Weight

Introductory Comments

The challenge session, focused on Child Healthy weight, particularly on reducing the prevalence of excess weight in the borough.

The Sub-Committee learnt about the correlation between excess weight and poverty and the wide range of work taking place in the borough on the issue.

In particular Tower Hamlets is leading the way through the universal implementation of free schools' meals which is demonstrated to have a positive impact on excess weight and in piloting new approaches to communicating the results of the National Child Measurement Programme to ensure that parents understand when their child is overweight, the support that is available to them and do not feel stigmatised,

Recommendations focused on: disordered eating

1 – Food

Fine tuning the implementation of FSMs.

Ensuring Healthy food is being accessed at our Youth Services

Engaging children in growing and cooking food

2 – Physical Activity

Ensuring access to Green Spaces, Sports Facilities and exercise classes

3 – Psychology and Culture

Involve food ambassadors

Contain fast food outlets

Consider children with special education needs and those who may be underweight or have



Scrutiny in Action: Registered Social Landlords Performance

This scrutiny challenge session in March 2024 allowed the Sub-Committee to hear from the Regulator of Social Housing, Housing Ombudsman, leading social housing and tenant engagement organisations and RPs themselves.

The focus was to review RP performance and the scope set out the following key questions:

- How is the RP performance aligned with the organisation's strategic priorities;
- What issues Registered Providers face when providing RP performance data particularly at local level;
- How is the data used to drive improvement for residents;
- What impact the new Tenant Satisfaction Measures are having;
- How can Scrutiny best add value.

This scrutiny challenge session provided the HRSSC an opportunity to scrutinise RPs in the borough.

The Committee noted that the new powers given by the Social Housing (Regulation) Act are a welcome improvement over the previous ones but it remains to be seen if they will be implemented in a robust

manner.

The Committee have made the following five recommendations as they feel more need to be done to improve the standard of housing in the borough:

Recommendation 1: The Sub-Committee and key stakeholders to ensure Registered Providers (RPs) are invited to attend more committee meetings by conducting regular spotlight session at every Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee meeting and inviting RPs to attend when their RP is being discussed.

Recommendation 2: Build in training provision and develop Committee Members with analysing performance data.

Recommendation 3: Invite Residents to give evidence at Housing Scrutiny Sub-Committee adding value and making committee meetings more robust.

Recommendation 4: The Sub-Committee will review the management of council's own housing stock and ensure it is being well managed.

Recommendation 5: The Sub-Committee will work with stakeholders and ensure the

council maximises its powers to improve the standards and the services housing providers give to residents.



Scrutiny in Action: Markets

Markets



The challenge session focused on improving support for street markets and Market Traders.

Scrutiny members visited street markets, inside and outside of the borough to engage traders and collect evidence on how the council could support them better.

To gather evidence, scrutiny engaged expert witnesses from the London Street Trading Benchmarking Group and the National Association of British Market Authorities.

Throughout the challenge session, traders made it clear how the council could ensure the future sustainability of Markets, and this was reflected in the final recommendations.

The session found that traders wanted to see enhanced facilities and infrastructure. This particularly included the provision of toilets, storage spaces and free WiFi.

Additionally, ASB and crime was raised as a key community safety concern for both traders and visitors. The report highlighted the need to address this through enhanced intelligence exchange between THEOs and traders, and more seamless crime reporting mechanisms for visitors.

Additionally, the separation of commercial waste, market waste, and residential waste was highlighted as a key concern. The report highlighted that enforcement measures on businesses dumping on markets needs to be reviewed and addressed.

Furthermore, the trader population is ageing both nationally and locally. To ensure the sustainability of markets, the report recommends working with schools and young adults to attract young people to the entrepreneurial opportunities available in Market Trading

Lastly, Markets intersect between two portfolio areas. Scrutiny recommends the implementation of an effective and ongoing communication mechanism between both Lead Members to facilitate consistent exchange of information and collaboration on market-related issues

