


<p style="text-align: center;"><b>OSC</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">28/01/2025</p>	
<p><b>Report of:</b> Cllr Nathalie Bienfait, Scrutiny Lead Environment and the Climate Emergency</p>	<p><b>Classification:</b> Unrestricted</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Flood Risk Management Recommendations</b></p>	

## Executive Summary

The report makes eight recommendations to optimise the approach to flood risk management for the borough of Tower Hamlets. The recommendations are based on engagement with the service, site visits, and discussion with an expert witness.

### Recommendations:

OSC is recommended to:

1. Comment on and agree on the recommendations in response to Flood Risk management in Tower Hamlets.

## **CHAIRS FORWARD**

I am pleased to present this important report on Flood Risk Management in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. As a Green Party Councillor, my vision is for our borough to firstly reduce our impact on the environment, but secondly be ready to face the risks from a changing climate. Flooding already affects our residents, and the risks will only increase as the climate crisis fuels more extreme weather. This project aimed to understand and, if needed, provide a spotlight and recommendations to strengthen the borough's approach to flood risk management. I am confident that the service has a strong approach to this issue and my recommendations are designed to make small tweaks to take our response to the next level.

I want to thank our colleagues Ashraf Ali, Moynul Islam, and Thomas Bayford in Public Realm for their ongoing work in this area, and for arranging and leading informative site visits. I also want to thank Nicholas Metcalfe and William Raw at Metis Consultants for their contributions to the review and targeted recommendations.

**Councillor Nathalie Bienfait**

**Scrutiny Lead – Environment and the Climate Emergency**



## **1 REASON FOR THE DECISIONS**

- 1.1 The Overview & Scrutiny Committee considered the Council's approach to Flood Risk management at its meeting on 17 December 2024. It is recommended that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agree on the recommendations to mitigate the risk of repeat flooding in Tower Hamlets, fulfilling and exceeding LBTH's role as the Lead Local Flood Authority. While flood risk management in Tower Hamlets is already strong, this scrutiny review makes six targeted recommendations to strengthen our response.

## **2 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

- 2.1 Not agreeing to the recommendations may put the borough at risk of flooding incidents. The recommendations exceed our statutory duties, and as such, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee could choose to agree only those recommendations that relate to Tower Hamlets's statutory duties as a Lead Local Flood Authority.

## **3 DETAILS OF THE REPORT**

### **Reason for investigation**

- 3.1 The London Borough of Tower Hamlets (LBTH) is designated as the Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) for its area by the Flood and Water Management Act 2010. As a result, we are responsible for managing flood risk associated with flooding from surface water, groundwater, and ordinary watercourses, which is defined as 'local flood risk'.
- 3.2 Climate change is leading to extreme weather, increasing the risk of heavy rain and flooding. Tower Hamlets is at lower risk than other areas of London from rivers or sea flooding, the main identified risk is from surface water flooding. The area has a Victorian combined sewer system, and the recent rapid development and population density add stress to this system.
- 3.3 There was one recent incidence of flooding in the borough in January 2024, when the River Lee Navigation canal flooded at Fish Island, damaging residential and commercial property. As the Lead Flood Authority, Tower Hamlets Council has investigated the cause of this flooding, and a report on it will soon be publicly available.

### **Process**

- 3.4 The council's flood risk management was brought to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on December 17th at the request of the Scrutiny Lead for Environment and the Climate Emergency. In preparation for the item, the

Scrutiny Lead conducted two site visits and spoke to external consultants at Metis who have expertise in flood risk management.

- 3.5 The first site visit was focused on Derbyshire Street in Bethnal Green, an area that has several sustainable drainage interventions (SuDS). These are designed to collect rainwater and prevent or slow the entry of water into the sewer system. The second site visit focused on Fish Island, the area that flooded in January 2024. The service explained the cause of flooding which was linked to automated sluice gates on the canal failing. Councillors also spoke to staff from the Canal and River Trust who happened to be on site at the time and residents living in the Peanut Factory whose homes and studios flooded.
- 3.6 Finally, the Scrutiny Lead engaged with Metis, civil engineering consultants who specialize in flood risk management and have worked with local authorities across London on these issues. Metis gave an external assessment of Tower Hamlets Council's approach's strengths and weaknesses and an overview of common challenges for flood risk management. Further, a representative from Metis attended the Overview and Scrutiny meeting on 17 December and was co-opted as an expert on the committee to support the committee with key lines of enquiry.

## **Findings**

- 3.7 The site visits, research, engagement, and committee discussion led the Scrutiny Lead to the following findings. Currently, the Local Flood Risk Management Strategy is out of date and expired in 2022. As the Lead Local Flood Authority, Tower Hamlets has a statutory duty to complete a Local Flood Risk Management Strategy at present we are non-compliant. Tower Hamlets is waiting for updates from the Greater London Authority to the Lee Valley Working Group strategies before publishing an up-to-date strategy. Metis have confirmed that the London-wide strategy is close to finalisation, therefore **the Scrutiny Lead recommends that the service begin work on the updated Local Flood Risk Management Strategy (Recommendation one)**. There are additional flood risk management documents updated by the council, the strategic flood risk assessment was carried out in 2017. The last flood preliminary flood risk assessment was carried out in 2011, and the Surface Water Management plan also dates from 2011. As a result, scrutiny recommends agreeing and publishing up-to-date strategy documents to provide an up-to-date strategic basis for work to combat flood risk. As part of this update, **the Scrutiny Lead recommends updating the Asset Register, which is another statutory requirement (Recommendation one)**.
- 3.8 At present there is only one full-time drainage engineer dedicated to flood risk and water management. Tower Hamlets receives significant volumes of planning applications, with this one engineer responding to the required rainwater management plans. It is part of the local authority's role as the Lead

Local Flood Authority to engage as a statutory consultee in planning for all major developments. Further, the proposed schedule 3 will expand the responsibilities and related workload of the drainage engineer. It is proposed that local authorities will not only review planning applications but also adopt and maintain the drainage assets that are included within developments. As a result, **the Scrutiny Lead recommends increasing the capacity of the engineering team (Recommendation two)**. The Lead notes the challenges in recruiting to the role and skills shortage, and the service have outlined innovative approaches by other local authorities in recruiting and up-skilling graduates to fill this gap.

- 3.9 To support a targeted approach to water management and flood prevention **the scrutiny lead recommends the service undertake a comprehensive mapping exercise or surface water management plan (Recommendation three)**. This should include mapping both areas of risk (of flooding) and opportunity, assessing which areas would be suitable for sustainable drainage systems (SuDs). In terms of risk, the strategic base should directly lead to an understanding of critical drainage areas and a structured schedule of maintenance based on areas of highest need. Based on risk a targeted CCTV survey could be conducted of existing assets to produce a structured schedule of maintenance, enabling the council to prioritise maintenance and meet our Best Value duty. Risk assessment can also be used to install targeted gully sensors integrated with our central management system to monitor silt levels and detect potential water surcharges. This proactive approach will enable timely interventions.
- 3.10 One of the primary actions the local authority takes to proactively prevent flooding is the clearance of gullies along highways and other drainage areas in the borough. The team carries out an extensive annual programme of cleans which has so far been successful in preventing surface water flooding. Nevertheless, with the increasing intensity of rainfall events and the increasingly built-up nature of Tower Hamlets, there are infrastructure changes that we can make to safeguard against surface water flooding in the future. The Scrutiny Lead recommends a capital investment into flat drain covers which prevent debris from blocking water from draining away, these are hinged drain covers consisting of cycle friendly mesh grating. It is recommended that these are installed in a program of planned upgrades across the borough, prioritising areas where they are most needed. Further, some legacy highway drain covers cause additional risk to cyclists and the service should consider targeted replacement of these drain covers to improve active travel and ensure the safety of road users.
- 3.11 In terms of opportunities, the introduction of SuDS is a critical way of reducing the impact of high-intensity rainfall on the sewerage system. These interventions aim to slow down the entry of water into the sewerage system until after peak flows of water which come from highways and other non-permeable surfaces. These schemes are part of the options available to developers when preparing rainwater management plans which are required to slow and divert

rainwater from new non-permeable surfaces from new buildings. The local authority has also installed some of these systems into highways schemes. The Scrutiny Lead recommends that risk and opportunity mapping is utilised to install further SuDS, prioritising critical drainage areas.

- 3.12 It is also considered good practice to allow rainwater to be absorbed into the ground rather than be directed to sewers. The southeast of England is water-stressed, and our access to clean drinking water is dependent on groundwater being replenished at a sustainable level. Although the drinking water in Tower Hamlets is abstracted from rivers fed by aquifers in other areas, the Scrutiny Lead considers it important to set a precedent for local authority areas to consider the replenishment of groundwater as part of its flooding and surface water management strategy. The Scrutiny Lead therefore recommends flood engineers to work with the council's Green Team to design planting schemes and underground drainage systems that can allow more water to be absorbed by the ground in parks and permeable surface areas. This will build on the programme of SuDS which will slow down water's progress to the sewerage system and will allow water to soak into the ground rather than diverting to sewerage systems.
- 3.13 There is no specific out-of-hours provision to respond to flooding incidents. Although the flooding and damage at Fish Island was caused by fluvial flooding and therefore the Environment Agency was the responsible flood authority, the Council still accepts responsibility to support its residents affected by flooding. The canal overtopped on the evening of the 4<sup>th</sup> of January just after 10 pm, outside of working hours, and the council was not able to respond until working hours. While this fluvial flooding would not have been our direct responsibility, a surface water flood incident would be, and the Scrutiny Lead recommends that the out-of-hours response to flooding is strengthened. **The scrutiny lead recommends that existing out-of-hours highway services should be briefed and resourced to respond to flooding emergencies (Recommendation four).** This could include an overview of key risk areas, relevant contacts, and the location of sandbags. This would allow existing stand-by services to respond to emergencies and coordinate with partners.
- 3.14 In practice relationships are essential to risk management, and to delivering responsibilities as the Local Lead Flood Authority. This includes relationships across directorates within the council and with external partners. **The scrutiny lead recommends that an internal flood risk group be considered (Recommendation five)** to engage key stakeholders across the council. This will support the identification of both risks and opportunities, for example, waste and street cleaning teams, or wardens will have detailed knowledge of specific areas of the borough and may be aware of areas where surface water may not drain effectively. Colleagues in parks or schools may also identify sites that would be suitable for sustainable drainage systems and be eligible for specific pots of funding for example through the Department for Education. Bringing these groups together regularly facilitates information sharing and keeps flood risk on the agenda for the wider council.

3.15 Relationships with external partners such as the Canal and River Trust and Thames Water are also key to delivering our responsibilities as the Local Lead Flood Authority. Capacity remains a challenge for the small team however the **scrutiny lead recommends regular engagement is set up with external partners to focus on Tower Hamlets specific issues (Recommendation six)**. This should include a targeted approach to engagement with the Environment Agency, the Canals and Rivers Trust and Thames Water as these partners are essential to reducing the risk of repeat incidences similar to the occurrence in Fish Island. It is hoped that the increased engineer capacity recommended above will enable the local authority to build key strategic relationships through regular contact.

## 4 RECOMMENDATIONS

<b>Theme One: A clear strategic vision, with additional resource</b>		
Recommendation One	Meet our statutory duties as the Local Lead Flood Authority by publishing an up-to-date Flood Risk Management Strategy document to provide a solid strategic basis for flood risk work. This is dependent on the GLA strategy which is close to finalisation. In parallel update the Asset Register.	Statutory duty
Recommendation Two	Onboard more engineers to manage the increased workload responding to planning applications and improve the service's resilience. This is of particular importance if and when schedule 3 is implemented.	Statutory duty and potential to become statutory duty
<b>Theme Two: A program of targeted works and strengthened out-of-hours approach</b>		
Recommendation Three	Develop a structured and targeted program including both new work and maintenance of existing assets. This should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mapping areas of drainage risk and opportunity</li> <li>• A targeted CCTV survey of existing drainage</li> <li>• Installing targeted Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDs) in high-risk areas</li> <li>• Installing targeted gully sensors integrated with our central management system to monitor silt levels and detect potential water surcharges</li> <li>• Targeted replacement of existing gully covers with cycle-friendly designs enhancing cyclist safety</li> </ul>	Good practice above our statutory duty
Recommendation Four	Ensure our existing standby service for highways during out-of-hours periods is appropriately resourced and briefed to respond promptly to flooding issues.	Good practice above our statutory duty
<b>Theme Three: Strengthened partnership working</b>		
Recommendation Five	Consider the running of an internal flood risk group this could include waste and cleansing, park services, highways, and schools to share information, manage risk, and identify possible opportunities for Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) within parks or schools	Good practice above our statutory duty
Recommendation Six	Set up a regular engagement sequence with external partners statutory and non-statutory including a targeted approach to engaging with Canal and River Trust and Environment Agency	Good practice above our statutory duty



## 4. APPENDICES AND BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

### Appendices

#### Appendix 1 – Photos of the site visit to Derbyshire Street



*Photo of a green roof 1*



*Photo of visit to Derbyshire Street 1*

## Appendix 2 – Photos of the site visit to Fish Island



*Photo of visit to Fish Island 1*

### **Background Documents – Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements)(Access to Information)(England) Regulations 2012**

- 5 Local Flood Risk Management Strategy (2017-2022)  
[Local Flood Risk Management Strategy.pdf](#)
- 6 Surface Water Management Plan (SWMP) – 2017  
<https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Environmental-protection/Monitoring/DLT2-GP4-TowerHamlets-SWMP-V2.0-Merged.pdf>
- 7 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment, 2017  
[London Borough of Tower Hamlets SFRA FINAL.pdf](#)
- 8 Preliminary Flood Risk Assessment, 2011  
<https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Environmental-protection/Monitoring/DLT2-GP4-TowerHamlets-PFRA.pdf>