

Mayor's Report to Council

15th January 2020

John Biggs, Mayor of Tower Hamlets

Key Events/Announcements

General Election

The national result means a large majority for the Prime Minister and we have already seen just what that majority means, for example removing compromises from the EU Withdrawal Agreement Bill including removing protections for workers' rights and watering down protections for refugee children which Lord Alf Dubs and many cross-party MPs had fought for and protections which we supported.

Despite the national picture, voters in Tower Hamlets voted overwhelmingly for Labour Members of Parliament to represent them and I congratulate both MPs on their decisive results. We will work with them as a strong Labour team to stand up for our borough. I also thank former MP Jim Fitzpatrick for all his years of service to his constituency and Tower Hamlets more generally; I hope he and Sheila enjoy their retirement!

Clearly the election was always going to be dominated by Brexit, but going forward we must not allow other vital issues to be drowned out. Whether it's NHS performance, funding for local councils or the new figures last month which showed that the number of homeless children has hit a 13-year high, addressing these issues is going to take a concentrated effort from everyone and despite the various public spending pledges within the Conservative manifesto, I am fearful about what the next 5 years hold for us here in Tower Hamlets.

Labour councils up and down the country are often referred to as the last line of defence against the damaging impact of central government public spending cuts – and I believe there is ample evidence in Tower Hamlets that this is the case, for example our Tackling Poverty Fund and funding additional police officers – but I hope Tower Hamlets Conservative councillors will support us by doing whatever they can to ensure the views of our borough are heard by their Conservative colleagues in government.

Budget

Our draft budget proposals have now been published and will come to full council next month.

I will be holding a special 'Ask the Mayor' event tomorrow (Thursday 16th January, 7-9pm), which is focussed on the council's budget. It will be held at Spotlight, 30 Hay Currie Street, Langdon Park, E14 6GN).

Tower Hamlets Council has had to save £190m since 2010 and despite the various election pledges on public service spending, we have to save an extra £39 million by 2023.

We have seen a huge increase in demand for key services, driven by rapid population growth and changing demographics and this is forecast to continue with the equivalent of 14 new residents every day for the next ten years.

By making services more efficient and driving down back-office costs, we have managed to prioritise investment in initiatives including:

- The borough's Idea Stores, libraries, leisure centres and award winning parks
- Our programme to deliver 2,000 new council homes at genuinely affordable social rents
- Funding for additional police officers to keep the borough's streets safer
- One of the most generous Council Tax Reduction schemes in the country which protects the poorest households from paying council tax.
- Our Liveable Streets programme to improve the environment as well as measures to tackle the Climate Emergency and clean up the borough's air quality
- Cleaning up our streets with investment in a new in-house waste service
- Supporting thousands more local people to develop new skills and gain employment.

The above are some of the highlights in our budget and they are innovative measures that will make a real difference. I must however emphasise the point that if the current funding picture continues, it will be progressively harder for services to continue as they are.

Local government faces a perfect storm of falling government funding and significant increases in demand. The government is also expected to bring forward the so-called 'Fair Funding' review which could take money away from areas of high deprivation like Tower Hamlets and redirect it to Tory shires – and their new parliamentary majority makes this much more likely.

Like many councils, we are proposing the difficult decision to recommend an increase in council tax of 1.99% in 2020/21 as well as a further 2% precept to fund adult social care services. In total the increases would amount to an extra 78p a week for the average Band D property. Tower Hamlets currently has the 7th lowest council tax in the capital and this will stay the same under the current proposals.

Holocaust Memorial Day & Nelson Street Synagogue

Holocaust Memorial Day is approaching – an important day where we come together to remember the victims of the Holocaust.

Members will have heard about the damage to Nelson Street Synagogue which has served this community for nearly 100 years and which was due to hold a Holocaust Memorial service. We offered assistance to the Interfaith Forum to find an alternative venue for the service and the service will now be at Sandys Row Synagogue.

Westferry Printworks

The Secretary of State has decided to go against the views of residents, the council and the Planning Inspectorate and granted planning permission for the Westferry Printworks site.

I'm extremely disappointed about this decision and strongly objected to the revised plans due to their increased height and density as well as the lack of affordable housing.

By ignoring the concerns expressed by the council and residents as well as the Planning Inspectorate decision it sets a worrying precedent for developers to get decisions approved behind closed doors ignoring local democracy.

Brexit

With 'Brexit day' fast approaching, there is still a great deal of uncertainty about what it actually means for our country, including for local councils. We remain vigilant about what the impact may be, and we must do everything we can to continue to support non-UK EU citizens living in our borough.

Social Housing Review

This is an issue which has attracted a great deal of attention.

We are committed to doing all we can to increase the supply of new homes which are genuinely affordable to local people. This includes our ambitious plans to have 2,000 new council homes in delivery by 2022 and Tower Hamlets continues to have some of the highest numbers of new affordable homes in the country.

However with 20,000 people on the housing register and only 1,329 lets last year there are many in band 3 who are unlikely to be successful given the scale of housing need in bands 1 and 2.

We are consulting on a number of proposals to our Common Housing Register Allocations Scheme to make it work best for residents. We will consider resident feedback carefully before deciding which options to take forward.

One of the proposals was to possibly limit Band 3 following similar moves from other councils and focus our efforts on rehousing those in most need of a council house and supporting others to alternative housing options.

However I have heard residents' concerns about potential changes to Band 3 and while we continue to want to hear views on the proposal I will not agree any changes going ahead without considerably more thought on its impact.

This means that the proposal on Band 3 will not now go ahead in their current form, although I have asked officers to look carefully at what options are available given the reality of the pressures on our housing stock.

Gambling Policy

I'm pleased that we have now adopted our updated Gambling Policy, which has strengthened our approach and allows the council to restrict the opening of new gambling premises near schools, playgrounds, residential homes for the elderly or vulnerable as well as hospitals or venues where Gamblers Anonymous meetings are held.

Air Quality awards

Two air quality projects, one funded by our Air Quality Fund and another funded by the Highways Department, have won awards from Sustrans. This demonstrates some of the innovative ideas that are working in the borough to improve our air quality and I'm delighted to see this work recognised.

One Stop Shops (OSS)

The Bow & North Poplar OSS (John Onslow House) and the South Poplar OSS (Chrisp Street) will close on 17th January as part of our programme of digital transformation and these services will move into nearby Idea Stores.

The counter service at the Bethnal Green One Stop Shop (Rushmead) will also stop on 17th January however the service provided by Tower Hamlets Homes will continue. Tower Hamlets Homes has also taken over the running of the building, but assistance with council transactions will still be available here for those who need it, by appointment.

We have invested in our Idea Stores so they look and feel better with digital hubs so we can support more residents to access services online but they can still call the council or access face to face support.

Individual Mayoral Decisions taken since last meeting

20th November 2019 – London Business Rate Strategic Investment Pot – Consultation response

Engagements and Meetings - 14 November 2019 to 15 January 2020

14 November 2019

- Divisional Director - Property and Major Programmes - Michael Rourke
- Cllr Rachel Blake
- Capital Strategy Board
- Practice Week with Children Social Care
- Mayor's casework surgery

15 November 2019

- East London Mosque Meeting

16 November 2019

- Watney Market 'Safer Together' day
- Bangladesh Book Fair, Literary and Cultural Festival

18 November 2019

- London Legacy Development Corporation Away-Day follow-up
- Tower Hamlets Partnership Executive Group Briefing
- Property Portfolio Meeting
- Briefing on London Dock School
- Pre-agenda meeting TIB Work Programme 2018-19
- Tower Hamlets Partnership Executive Group
- Labour Group Executive Committee
- Labour Group

20 November 2019

- School Cuts campaign meeting
- Cllr Val Whitehead
- Meeting with Catherine McGuinness, City of London
- Corporate Director Asmat Hussain
- Meeting with officers and Cllr Uz-Zaman re. City Fringe
- Mayor's Advisory Board
- Meeting with Weavers and St Peter's ward councillors

21 November 2019

- Meeting with Maria Adebawale-Scwatre (Future for London)
- Cllr Asma Begum
- Q2 Performance & Budget monitoring meeting
- Chief Executive, Will Tuckley
- Regeneration Board meeting
- Resident home visit
- Mayor's casework surgery
- Resident home visit

22 November 2019

- Fostering awards

24 November 2019

- Jagannathpur British Bangla Education Trust event

26 November 2019

- Central London Forward Board meeting
- Tower Hamlets Homes Chief Executive Susmita Sen
- Strategic Forward Planning meeting
- St George's Town Hall site visit
- Housing & Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee

27 November 2019

- Children, Schools & Young People portfolio meeting
- Planning, Air Quality & Tackling Poverty portfolio meeting

- Meeting with borough's head teachers
- Cabinet briefing
- Mayor's Political Cabinet
- Mayor's Advisory Board
- Cabinet meeting

28 November 2019

- Town Hall Project Board
- Chief Executive, Will Tuckley
- Housing Portfolio meeting
- Divisional Director Regeneration & Sustainability Karen Swift
- Mayor's casework surgery

29 November 2019

- Bench dedication at Jackman House
- Social Worker of the Year Awards

1 December 2019

- St Georges Garden Christmas lights switch on

2 December 2019

- Redchurch Partnership Meeting
- Regeneration Board agenda planning
- New City College, Poplar
- Work & Economic Growth Portfolio meeting
- Aldgate Development - 101 Whitechapel
- Labour Group

3 December 2019

- London Councils Labour Group
- London Councils Leader's Committee
- Divisional Director, Strategy & Performance, Sharon Godman
- London Dock School
- Community Safety & Equalities Portfolio meeting
- Parking Policy Review Group
- Bromley by Bow Centre anniversary event

4 December 2019

- Environment Portfolio meeting
- Mayor's Traffic meeting
- Mayor's Advisory Board
- Speaker's Ball

5 December 2019

- Meeting with Barts Health
- Chief Executive, Will Tuckley
- Liveable Streets Bethnal Green briefing
- Brick Lane Liveable Streets briefing

- CLS Review briefing
- Mayor's casework surgery
- Christmas Carol - A fairy tale

6 December 2019

- Tower Hamlets Muslim Staff Forum Gala Dinner

9 December 2019

- Property Portfolio meeting
- Transformation Improvement Board preparation
- Burdett Road cycle route meeting
- Cllr David Edgar
- Tower Hamlets Transformation and Improvement Board

10 December 2019

- One Housing Group re. Isle of Dogs
- Mayor's Regeneration Board
- Mayor's casework surgery
- Former Cllr Shab Uddin condolences

17 December 2019

- Planning meeting
- HRA briefing
- Divisional Director Public Realm, Dan Jones
- Labour Group Executive Committee
- Labour Group

18 December 2019

- Planning meeting
- Cllr John Pierce
- Resources Portfolio meeting
- Children, Schools & Young People Portfolio meeting
- Adults, Health & Wellbeing Portfolio meeting
- Cabinet briefing
- Grants Determination Sub Committee agenda planning
- Mayor's Advisory Board
- Cabinet
- King George's Field Charity Board

19 December 2019

- Liveable Streets programme briefing
- Cllr Rachel Blake
- Chief Executive, Will Tuckley
- Corporate Director, Ann Sutcliffe
- Clichy Estate resident meeting
- Tower Hamlets Homes Outstanding Contribution to the Community Awards (OSCCAs) ceremony

20 December 2019

- Agenda Discussion – Isle Of Dogs and South Poplar Board
- Customer Services briefing

23 December 2019

- Divisional Director Customer Services, Shazia Hussain

6 January 2020

- Corporate Director, Asmat Hussain
- Divisional Director HR, Amanda Harcus
- Aberfeldy Medical Centre
- Divisional Director Strategy, Policy & Performance, Sharon Godman
- Cllr Dipa Das

7 January 2020

- Capital Strategy briefing
- Official Opening of the Roe Wing, Queen Victoria Seamen's Rest
- York Hall Leisure Centre visit
- Digital Health visit

8 January 2020

- Work & Economic Growth Portfolio meeting
- Regeneration Board agenda planning
- Resident meeting
- Resident meeting
- Play policy briefing
- Mayor's Advisory Board
- Cabinet

9 January 2020

- Cllr Eve McQuillan
- Cllr Rachel Blake
- Capital Programme update
- Chief Executive, Will Tuckley
- Liveable Streets Wapping briefing
- Bangladesh Welfare Association meeting re. Martyrs Day
- Mayor's casework surgery

13 January 2020

- City of London markets relocation meeting
- Property Portfolio meeting
- London Newcastle meeting
- Burdett Road cycle route meeting with ward councillors and TfL
- Whitechapel ward catch-up
- Overview and Scrutiny Committee

14 January 2020

- National Association of Regional Employers meeting

15 January 2020

- Environment Portfolio meeting
- Mayor's Regeneration Board
- Resident meeting
- Isle of Dogs & South Poplar Area Board
- Mayor's Advisory Board
- Labour Group
- Council