

# Overview & Scrutiny Committee

## Review of London Borough of Tower Hamlets' Response to COVID-19

21/09/2020



## Table of Contents

Chair's Foreword .....	3
Recommendations .....	4
Strategic and cross-cutting .....	4
Health and wellbeing .....	5
Children and young people .....	6
Introduction .....	7
Summary of Evidence: April 2020-August 2020 .....	8
OSC Questions (24 April 2020) .....	8
Spotlight Session (21 May 2020) .....	9
Insight Session - Community & Partner feedback (22 June) .....	9
OSC meeting (22 July 2020) .....	10
COVID-19 Resident Impact Survey .....	11
Scrutiny Sub-Committee meetings .....	11
Key findings and Recommendations .....	13
Strategic and cross-cutting .....	13
Health and wellbeing .....	18
Children and young people .....	21
Conclusion .....	23

## Chair's Foreword

In April 2020 the Overview & Scrutiny Committee members met remotely for the first time for an informal meeting to consider the Council's response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The months that followed were devoted to evidence gathering and analysis to understand how the Council has supported residents throughout the pandemic and how they can continue to do so in view of a second wave, the summaries of which are included here.

As lockdown restrictions continue to ease and the borough gradually begins to get back into the rhythm of delivering for residents, there are three main challenges ahead:

1. Preparing for a second wave of the pandemic
2. Assessing and planning for the financial and economic impacts of the pandemic over the coming year
3. Preparing the borough in the long term for new economic realities and tackling the inequalities the pandemic has exposed and will deepen

This report's main recommendation is for the Council to put a Commission in place to identify and respond to the long-term challenges of COVID-19, in a similar way it did with Brexit.

With COVID-19 cases creeping up (as of early September), time is of the essence to ensure the Council is prepared to respond should a second wave be forthcoming. All our recommendations are focussed on the most pressing issues the Council can be addressing now. They are designed to be as practical as possible and are being published now in the hope that action will be taken soon.

This report is intended to be a concise and focused look at the Council's response and will not capture everything the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and its Sub-Committee have reviewed in the past few months. A more comprehensive list of evidence and data is available on the Council's website at the Overview & Scrutiny Committee pages. I'd also encourage you to view the video recordings of our meeting which can be accessed via the website.

Challenging as the pandemic is and as challenging as our borough can be, Council staff have proved themselves focused on protecting and delivering for residents. We want to thank them for their dedication and pay tribute to all the personal sacrifices made.

Through these times, the borough at large has been at its best; with residents coming together to support their neighbours. With all the talk of what can be improved let's not forget what positive things need to be retained and cherished too.



**Councillor James King, Chair - Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

# Recommendations

## Strategic and cross-cutting

### **Recommendation 1: COVID-19 Impacts Commission**

Establish a commission to collate and disseminate information (including specifically to Overview and Scrutiny and other members) on impacts of COVID-19 on residents and stakeholders, service users and services and develop an understanding on long term trends of COVID-19, including differing demand for office space and housing and health services.

### **Recommendation 2: Digital Inclusion**

Produce a new digital inclusion strategy that looks at how the Council could actively help those who are digitally excluded to get online, building on the 2015-18 strategy.

### **Recommendation 3: VCS support**

That the Council and its partners directly support the Voluntary and Community Sector to transition in recovery, and work together to develop a sustainable model for the sector.

### **Recommendation 4: BAME Communities**

That the borough's Test and Trace Programme utilise local networks; including GP practices, community and faith organisations to target these groups to increase uptake and understanding of the test and trace programme.

### **Recommendation 5: Council finances**

- A. Audit all saleable assets with an assessment for sale against a long-term cost-benefit analysis
- B. Assess impact on services of proposed job losses, particularly post-furlough (in October)
- C. Produce a report on approach to commercialisation for 2020-21, and 2021-22; particularly in Parks and Culture. The Commercialisation Board to explain overall approach to OSC in 2021/22
- D. Scrutiny leads to review in depth their areas of savings and income as part of quarterly budget monitoring

### **Recommendation 6: The Local Economy**

That the Council works with partners to undertake scenario-planning to model the impact on the local economy and start to plan mitigation.

### **Recommendation 7: Support for Market Traders**

Ensure market traders are provided with business development support to increase their resilience and if future grants become available better support market traders to ensure their COVID-19 costs are covered in the same way as was offered to other businesses.

## Health and wellbeing

### **Recommendation 8: Food provision**

Support community organisations to ensure vulnerable and isolated residents have adequate access to a hot meal. Where GDPR allows, the Council should collate all the addresses and needs of residents identified with the need for regular hot meals by VCS partners.

### **Recommendation 9**

The Council should part fund and work with other funding providers to ensure this need continues to be met by our VCS.

### **Recommendation 10**

Further analysis should take place on the causes of need to understand how much was pre-existing and exacerbated by the pandemic, versus how much is new need relating to job losses or social distancing impacting on informal caring networks

### **Recommendation 11: Shielding vulnerable residents**

Maintain and resource local pathways beyond September with Primary Care Networks for shielding in anticipation of subsequent waves.

### **Recommendation 12: Local test and trace**

Report on the effectiveness/performance/reach of local test, trace, isolate programme as part of the ongoing response to the pandemic – with results reviewed before the winter flu season to reduce the severity of a second wave.

### **Recommendation 13: Rough sleepers**

A. Develop a sustainable approach that delivers the same results keeping rough sleepers off the street. Requesting and lobbying government for funding, including through London Councils.

B. Review the quality of its short-term accommodation, especially in instances where families with children have been placed in accommodation with shared facilities and amenities

C. The Council and its partners should map the increase in referrals and where they came from as well as the paths individuals subsequently took

D. Develop a sustainable approach to support those with No Recourse for Public Funds and lobby government to ensure this group is not left at risk.

### **Recommendation 14: Domestic Violence Support**

Proactively communicate using a range of channels and community languages the support available for victims of domestic violence and ensure resource is planned to meet potential increase in demand.

### **Recommendation 15: Care Homes**

That the Health Scrutiny Committee undertake a review of learning of the response to the pandemic by engaging care homes, residents' families and other stakeholders to identify long term recommendations for improvement.

## Children and young people

### **Recommendation 16: Recovery for children**

The recovery programme for children in Tower Hamlets should include the input of specialist teachers. Emphasise not just on 'catch up' but on the social-emotional needs of young people, especially vulnerable children and those with SEND to ensure a successful transition back to school. Schools should be engaged to identify curriculum and attainment gaps and what additional tuition and after school clubs could be conducted to address this.

### **Recommendation 17: Free School Meals**

That Children's and Education Sub-committee review the rollout of the National Voucher Scheme in TH as an effective replacement for the Council's Universal Free School Meals programme.

### **Recommendation 18: Mental health support**

Young people are more likely to be affected by COVID-19 with anxiety and depression, with factors such as security, housing security and living quality related to the increase.

A. Ensure effective signposting to services such as housing and benefits as quickly as possible.

B. Establish a mental health partnership put in place to co-ordinate remedial plans across relevant sectors like education and housing.

## Introduction

The World Health Organisation (WHO) classed coronavirus as a pandemic on 11 March 2020 and the Multi-Agency Tower Hamlets Pandemic Plan was activated on the same the day, triggering the creation of the borough's Partnership Pandemic Committee to oversee the local response. As the pandemic forced the Council to adapt its services and redeploy resources to support the local emergency response to the pandemic, so too did the Overview & Scrutiny Committee (OSC) adapt its work programme to consider how Members can best support the Council and residents during the crisis, and lead on local-led scrutiny of the operational response and recovery plans.

OSC began its scrutiny of the Council's response to COVID-19 in April 2020, following up with monthly reviews at OSC virtual meetings, and further Sub-Committee reviews on portfolio-specific topics in July and August.

OSC has found the Council's response to be far-reaching and comprehensive since the pandemic outbreak in March 2020, and that LBTH and partners were deployed effectively to address priority issues arising from the pandemic. The Pandemic Plan was quickly revised and published, with a range of hierarchical governance structures put in place in an emergency response arrangement.

Significantly, OSC feel that many of the issues which have presented themselves were not born out of COVID-19 but were pre-existing and exposed by the pandemic. Issues such as digital inclusion, loneliness, mental health, health disparities for BAME groups and inadequate food provision for elderly and vulnerable people are all issues that existed long before the emergence of COVID-19.

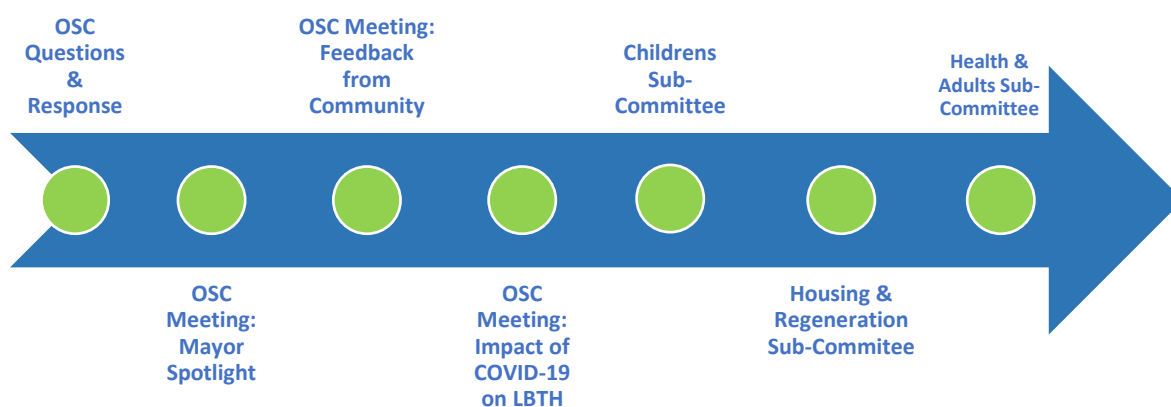
The Council's Cabinet has assessed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Tower Hamlets so far and has attempted to predict the impact going forward.

Cabinet has also:

- recognised the need to work differently to adapt and meet the needs of our community - developing new ways of delivering essential services and working out how some of the new ways of working can be made permanent.
- renewed the Council's Strategic Plan to recognise the new journey the borough will be undertaking in recovering from the pandemic. OSC support the work of the Council's Cabinet to date and have made the recommendations in this report to bring attention to areas which need further action and support.
- assessed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Tower Hamlets so far and has attempted to predict the impact going forward.
- recognised the need to work differently to adapt and meet the needs of our community - developing new ways of delivering essential services and working out how some of the new ways of working can be made permanent.
- renewed the Council's Strategic Plan to recognise the new journey the borough will be undertaking in recovering from the pandemic.

Our recommendations are focused on areas where progress from the Cabinet is not as detailed.

## Summary of Evidence: April 2020-August 2020



OSC began its scrutiny of the Council's response to COVID-19 with the submission of written questions to Council services on 24 April 2020, with responses received on 4 May.

This was followed by the first virtual meeting of OSC on 21 May which provided an opportunity for Members to review the response they received to their written submission and featured a spotlight with the Mayor, Chief Executive and Director of Public Health.

A meeting was then held on 22 June to gather external views on the Council's response from members of the community and partner organisations. They provided valuable insight into the impact of the Council's response to COVID-19 on the community and covered areas of health, employment, housing and the community and voluntary sector.

The latest OSC meeting to consider the impact of COVID-19 on Tower Hamlet was held on 27 July and this was then followed by Scrutiny Sub Committees' meetings to consider the issues specific to their portfolio areas:

- Health and Adults Scrutiny Sub-Committee meeting 23 July: Local COVID-19 Outbreak Plan; Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health;
- Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee meeting 13 July: Moving forward on COVID-19; and
- Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee meeting 11 August: Overall Context and financial pressures; Children's Social Care and Early Help; Education and SEND.

### OSC Questions (24 April 2020)

The Committee submitted a number of key questions to Council services which focused on the Council's operational response to COVID-19. The submission covered a range of areas including strategic oversight of the pandemic, financial



impact, engagement with community groups, intelligence, care workers, BAME communities, communications, housing, and young people.

### **Spotlight Session (21 May 2020)**

The Committee reviewed the Council's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and scrutinised the plans in place to support the recovery from the crisis at a two-hour question and answer session with the Mayor, Chief Executive and Director of Public Health.

The Committee focused on a wide range of areas including:

- How effectively the Council has spent the additional funding provided by government and what new financial pressures the pandemic has placed on the Council.
- Whether the Council's strong housing policy at the top level has translated into effective frontline service provision.
- How the Council is using data to inform their planning and decision making.
- How effective the Pandemic Plan was, and lessons learnt.
- The sustainability of redeploying staff.
- How the Council has communicated with residents who are digitally excluded.
- Whether local input, expertise and knowledge will be used to support Test and Trace.
- If adequate plans are in place during the transition out of lockdown to continue to support food deliveries to those residents who will still rely on it.
- How the Council will maintain social distancing once the lockdown has eased. and how residents will be consulted on these changes.
- How the Council will be working with TFL to free up space for people to safely move around the borough.

The full session can be viewed at: [https://towerhamlets.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast\\_interactive/487147](https://towerhamlets.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/487147)

### **Insight Session - Community & Partner feedback (22 June)**

The Committee invited a few well-placed members from the community and in partner organisations to provide community insight and consider the immediate and long term challenges the Council and the borough will be facing.

OSC heard from Pam Bhamra, Chair of Tower Hamlets Housing Forum and Director of Operations at Tower Hamlets Community Housing. Pam detailed the following key issues:

- Importance of replacing and reinventing community centres with online activities
- overcrowding in households as a hindrance to people isolating effectively, allowing the virus to spread more easily, and straining home schooling
- isolation and loneliness as critical to individual health and wellbeing
- discussed the ways in which the Council, GLA and partners had housed the homeless population

Ian Parkes, Chief Executive of East London Business Alliance (ELBA), provided his feedback on the impact on businesses and the economy. Ian highlighted the following:

- ELBA had received no notifications of business closures or insolvency
- Small businesses will not be able to keep running beyond 3 months if lockdown does not end reasonably quickly
- The VCS required support, particularly with overheads
- Support for education leavers in 2021 who had lost out on significant learning time would be required

Dr Jackie Applebee and Dr Naureen Bhatti, Chair and Vice Chair of Tower Hamlets LMC, provided a summary of the key health challenges the borough is facing and highlighted the following:

- High levels of deprivation and a large BAME population provide additional challenges for Tower Hamlets
- The necessity of a robust, locally organised, community test, track, isolate and support programme.
- Mortality in care homes has been significant, with care homes in Tower Hamlets having over thirty deaths.
- The lack of community testing and PPE for care home staff and for key workers is likely to have led to unnecessary transmission of the virus early in the pandemic
- Assessment and treatment of other conditions has been put on hold and will have ramification
- the worsening of pre-existing mental health issues or suffering mental illness for the first time due to anxieties regarding COVID 19.

Sister Christine Frost and Muna Ali from Neighbours in Poplar fed back their experiences and findings:

- The lack of internet access has made issues of isolation more acute and the reliance of the Council to communicate via digital methods has excluded many older and younger residents.
- The vast scale of mental health issues has been highlighted and exacerbated by the pandemic.
- The necessity to support our most vulnerable residents with access to hot meals.

The full session can be viewed at: [https://towerhamlets.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast\\_interactive/488475](https://towerhamlets.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/488475)

### **OSC meeting (22 July 2020)**

OSC considered the Council's Understanding the Impact of COVID-19 on Tower Hamlets report. This was a very comprehensive report and much of the evidence put forward has informed the findings of this report. The Chair invited the Committee to provide comments on the Committee's draft COVID-19 report and additional representations were made from committee members about:

- Communication within the community
- Uptake of testing and importance of test and trace
- Shielding provision
- Care Homes Support Plan
- Delivery of recovery plan for Children, Young People and Schools
- Free School Meals

- Support for social distancing in the built environment
- Budget recovery
- Grant support for Market Traders

### **COVID-19 Resident Impact Survey**

The Council conducted a self-selecting Covid-19 impact survey earlier in the summer. This was hosted on the Council's consultation and engagement hub and promoted via social media, newsletter and through voluntary and community sector contacts. Because this was self-selecting, caution must be exercised when drawing conclusions. It is indicative rather than representative and was used alongside other evidence to assess the impact. The impact report in turn informed the update of the Strategy Plan, which is in the Appendix

The COVID-19 resident impact survey found generally respondents were satisfied with the way the Council and partners are managing their response to the pandemic and further highlighted concerns inform the detailed recommendation below.

### **Scrutiny Sub-Committee meetings**

In addition to the evidence considered at OSC, scrutiny Sub-Committees have also met to undertake further scrutiny. The following summarises the key points raised at their meetings and informs the recommendations made in this report.

#### **Health and Adults Scrutiny Sub-Committee**

##### Local Outbreak Control Plan:

- There is recognition that effective communication is essential to inform and reassure different groups and settings across the borough on how to prevent further outbreaks and reduce transmission of infection.
- Intelligence nationally and locally suggests that uptake of testing and self-isolation is lower amongst the south Asian communities.
- Shielding support from government will be reduced in the coming months.
- Co-morbidity (such as diabetes and high blood pressure) is considered a likely factor in leading to COVID-19 related deaths.

##### Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health services:

- There is an increase in referrals amongst 18-39-year olds. Surveys conducted by University College London suggest young people are more likely to be affected by COVID-19 with anxiety and depression. The findings suggest job security, housing security and living quality are factors related to the increase.
- Young people are more likely to adapt to new virtual resources which can enable initial contact much faster. However, people's experiences vary when it comes to effective support and treatment in present COVID-19 conditions.
- There is an emerging concern of mental health issues amongst children, younger people and their families.

#### **Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee**

- The Council has provided suitable self-contained temporary accommodation for rough sleepers - over 200 individuals were placed into emergency

accommodation which included more than 40 cases with no recourse to public funds.

- The Council is developing an Exit Plan, which would include developing a single offer for everyone taken in as part of the pandemic, recognising the difficulties that will be encountered for those with No Recourse to Public Funds and the cost implications to the Council.
- The Council is maximising income by ensuring that rough sleepers claim Housing Benefit.

### **Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee**

- The Sub-Committee noted that COVID-19 had shone a light on inequalities, and that these could be exacerbated further and would lead to poorer outcomes for young people and their families, higher demands for support and increased financial pressures on the Council.
- The directorate has gross overspend of £5.5m (reported in July) – this forecast includes the impact of COVID-19 estimated at £4m: Children's Social Care £0.7m, Education & Partnerships £0.3m, Youth Services & Commissioning £2.1m, Sports, Leisure and Culture £2.2m and Children's Resources £0.1m.
- The Scrutiny Lead has focused on issues relating to Council led delivery of services for children and young people. It was noted that the response of our schools had been a real strength for the Borough.
- There had been a significant increase in the directorate's expenditure which the Council had identified pre COVID-19. To this end a SEND recovery plan had been submitted to DfE in December 2019. Since then, there has been a further significant increase in the directorate's expenditure, both actual and forecast, for several reasons including:
  - support for those families with no access to other funds.
  - increase in the level of support to special educational needs and disabilities including ongoing pressures in relation to the high needs funding block
- Attendance at school is mandatory again. Schools will also have to stagger break and lunchtimes, as well as start and finish times, to keep groups apart and reduce foot traffic in canteens, corridors, and doorways.

# Key findings and Recommendations

## Strategic and cross-cutting

### Recommendation 1: COVID-19 Impacts Commission

The COVID-19 Pandemic Committee provides strategic coordination of the multi-agency response and oversees the implementation of the Pandemic Plan. It has strategic oversight of the system-wide risks/issues registers, reviews key policy developments, engages with the Borough Resilience Forum, and coordinates communication across partners.

However, in moving from a pandemic response mode to recovery, there is a need to establish recovery oversight and coordination.

OSC will ensure that scrutiny of the ongoing response to COVID-19 will be incorporated into the 2020/21 work programme as the Committee continue to hold the Council to account, reflect the voice and concerns of residents, and supports the organisation to make robust and informed decisions.

In order to allow for greater transparency and insight in the Council's response and recovery efforts, and to provide better oversight of the key strategic decisions which will be made, an identifiable group whose remit is to collate, validate, and disseminate information about COVID-19 impacts is needed. Robust information needs to be shared with members, including those with scrutiny responsibilities. In this way, confidence and trust can be maintained across the Council, including support for decision-making in the weeks and months ahead.

**Recommendation 1:** Establish a commission to collate and disseminate information (including specifically to Overview and Scrutiny and other members) on impacts of COVID-19 on residents and stakeholders, service users and services and develop an understanding on long term trends of COVID-19, including differing demand for office space and housing and health services.

### Recommendation 2: Digital Inclusion

OSC's discussions with residents and community organisations highlighted digital inclusion to be a key issue facing the borough. The Council's Digital Exclusion Strategy 2015-2018 notes that around 86% of residents have access to the internet and there are a number of residents, especially some older residents, residents with disabilities and BME residents, as well as residents who live in social housing, who require significant support to be able to use online services.

COVID-19 resident impact survey told us that 6.9% of people surveyed were accessing and 10% needed to access but weren't currently getting information about what is on offer in their community. People also told us they were more digitally active, including 16.7% saying they were using the internet more confidently

Neighbours in Poplar informed OSC that for many of the people they support, the lack of internet access has made issues of loneliness and isolation more acute and the reliance of the Council to communicate via digital methods has excluded many older and younger residents from receiving key information.

The Committee was informed that the Council was releasing key information via weekly e-newsletters, updates on the website and through social media channels. Whilst the Council also engaged with residents through other methods such as leafletting, digital billboards and banners, the increased reliance on digital methods serves to highlight the need to increase digital literacy in the borough.

Similarly, Tower Hamlets Housing Forum noted the importance of replacing and reinventing community centres with online activities however there remains many residents unable to access these services and therefore left feeling the gaps left by the absence of the physical activities they replaced.

**Recommendation 2:** Produce a new digital inclusion strategy that looks at how the Council could actively help those who are digitally excluded to get online, building on the 2015-18 strategy.

### Recommendation 3: VCS support

VCS organisations have played an integral role in LBTH's response to COVID-19, with 74 VCS organisations known to be offering support to residents (as of 15th May). OSC heard from Neighbours in Poplar who identified and supported many vulnerable residents with the provision of a hot meal. OSC does not understand how their can be such a reliance on a small VCS organisation to ensure residents are provided with a hot meal and requests that the Council reviews its provision in this area, especially as we enter the winter months when a second wave of the Pandemic could emerge.

Furthermore, the Committee identified that during the pandemic many people who have not historically been involved in community activism have engaged, volunteered and helped to set up mutual aid groups. The Council needs to ensure it does all it can to support and sustain the interests and participation of this group as we move further into the recovery and many of these people will have to return to work and may not have as much time to offer.

VCS in Tower Hamlets fed back that future financial viability is main concern due to loss of income and future funding uncertainty. There are concerns that the economic recovery will not keep pace with support to the sector being phased out, leading to financial pressures and potential closure. One report estimates 1 in 10 UK charities faces bankruptcy by the end of the year. Some have concerns about ability to adapt/offer service in safe way (e.g. if can't offer remotely) and lack of suitable IT infrastructure to work differently.

ELBA highlighted similar concerns and noted that while many organisations have thrived and have been able to tap into emergency funding sources and response funds, many have struggled and will need help to get back on their feet. They will need the full range of skills – from legal, HR, ICT, digital, financial strategies. ELBA advised that we need to start looking at how we can build a better eco-structure for the community sector – from support and development for their leaders to improving digital and data capability.

It's clear to the Committee that the VCS will play a vital role in support residents in the boroughs recovery efforts and potential second wave and the Council needs to consider how they can better work with the voluntary sector to identify vulnerable residents and ensure that there is sustainable model of support in place.

**Recommendation 3:** That the Council and its partners directly support the Voluntary and Community Sector to transition in recovery, and work together to develop a sustainable model for the sector.

#### Recommendation 4: BAME Communities

OSC heard from Dr Jackie Applebee and Dr Naureen Bhatti who informed the Committee that having a large BAME population provides additional challenges for Tower Hamlets. COVID-19 impacts society unevenly and Public Health England's review of disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19 found that the likelihood of testing positive and dying with COVID-19 is higher for Black and Asian ethnic groups when compared to White ethnic groups. The report notes that people of Bangladeshi ethnicity had around twice the risk of death than people of White British ethnicity. People of Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Other Asian, Caribbean and Other Black ethnicity had between 10% and 50% higher risk of death when compared to White British. This was supported by analysis from Queen Mary University which showed that people of South Asian ethnicity had 1.9 times the risk of being infected with coronavirus and those from Black ethnic groups had 1.6 times compared to those of White Ethnicity. It also highlighted higher levels of infection linked to deprivation.

Additionally, the Council's *Understanding the Impact of COVID-19 on Tower Hamlets* report noted that in addition to higher risk of COVID-19 deaths, the existing risk factors associated with mental health are likely to be exacerbated as changes to mental health services and the economic downturn kick in.

**Recommendation 4:** That the borough's Test and Trace Programme utilise local networks; including GP practices, community and faith organisations to target these groups to increase uptake and understanding of the test and trace programme.

#### Recommendation 5: Council finances

The Council is facing extreme financial challenges partially due to the growth in demand for services, finding savings increasing difficult to make, as well as the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic which has had a profound impact on the budget and, consequently, on its financial planning expectations.

There has been a large cost of the pandemic response efforts. The significant impact on the Council's budget includes an estimated funding shortfall of £35.72m for April, May, and June 2020- equivalent to an additional £108 per resident. The funding shortfall is a combination of increased spending and loss of income - which has led to an estimated net additional spending of £55.12 million, with the government, so far, only committing to provide just £19.4 million from its COVID-19 support grant.

While OSC recognises the need for expenditure on pandemic response, it continues to be concerned about the Council's financial discipline and budget management, and considers there is improvement to be made here – not the least of which includes greater scrutiny involvement in budget setting generally, and COVID-19 recovery specifically.

OSC discussions focused on issues relating to projected overspends and plans to mitigate this, the likelihood of further slippages, and the Council's reserves – and enquired as to what controls would be in place for holding budget holders

accountable for overspending. To which it was noted that budgets were managed in line with the Council's constitution including the finance and procurement regulations. Members also heard that to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on budget overspend, officers had introduced additional controls, and intended to put in place further controls to ensure this, including applying restrictions over recruitment and strengthening the internal mechanisms in holding budget holders to account.

Overspending has been a problem particularly in the children's and adult's directorates over recent years. As a result of COVID-19, every bit of money spent now makes a huge difference. The Council's reserves are diminishing, and now given the COVID-19 spending and funding shortfalls, our reserves have reduced below £20 million which puts it in a bad financial position. Over the last two years, Children's and Adults' directorates have recorded significant overspends, leading to substantial withdrawals from our reserves to fill the gap.

#### **Recommendation 5 :**

- A. Audit all saleable assets with an assessment for sale against a long-term cost-benefit analysis
- B. Assess impact on services of proposed job losses, particularly post-furlough (in October)
- C. Produce a report on approach to commercialisation for 2020-21, and 2021-22; particularly in Parks and Culture. The Commercialisation Board to explain overall approach to OSC in 2021/22
- D. Scrutiny leads to review in depth their areas of savings and income as part of quarterly budget monitoring

#### **Recommendation 6: The Local Economy**

OSC was pleased to hear from ELBA that they had no notifications of business closures or insolvency. However, the key challenges for businesses are impending as most small businesses will not be able to keep running beyond 3 months if lockdown does not end reasonably quickly. While there has been relatively little feedback from firms in high distress, this may change in the months ahead as businesses reopen and begin to incur costs whilst their revenues are slower to recover. Lockdown arrangements have resulted in changes to business accommodation needs in the short-term.

Moving into recovery and with lockdown lifted, many business centres/sites have remained closed and may stay this way in the medium term. In a survey conducted in early May, 350 LBTH businesses responded and reported their top 3 issues to be paying rent (61%), staff wages (61%), reduced customer/footfall (74%). The Council needs to understand the impact this will have, and the support required to mitigate for this in both the short term and long term.

As part of the Committee's focus on the impact of COVID-19 on Tower Hamlets, OSC was informed that whilst pre-COVID-19 unemployment levels in LBTH had fallen, a significant proportion of workforce are in low paid, part time or insecure employment.

The economic situation has likely dampened work opportunities that may support people out of poverty. In-work poverty had increased, and this group made up a significant proportion of deprived households. This group are also likely to be



experiencing financial hardship due to COVID-19, with knock-on effects for child poverty and 'first 1000 days' of a child's life.

The COVID-19 resident impact survey shows more than 50% of residents identified there has been a negative impact (extremely negative or fairly negatively) on their employment status and work, and respondents named support for residents who are unemployed or reduced in income (35%) as their top concern.

Tower Hamlets may have been hardest hit by economic downturn than most given the number of residents in sectors hit hardest such as hospitality and retail, with 19% of LBTH residents working in the distribution, hotel and restaurant sector in 2016-19. Moreover, increased levels of deprivation are indicated through a high increase in food bank use and emergency food requests, welfare and debt advice. As of June 2020, 16% of the working age LBTH population had been furloughed.

**Recommendation 6:** That the Council works with partners to undertake scenario-planning to model the impact on the local economy and start to plan mitigation.

**Recommendation 7: Support for Market Traders**

Given the nature of their work, Market Traders have been particularly hard hit and face difficulty sustaining their business throughout the pandemic. A survey conducted by the National Market Traders Federation reported that 65% of market & street traders have been forced to close.

OSC was pleased to see that as part of the Discretionary Grants Scheme funds have been made available to support local businesses, however we are concerned that only 10% was allocated to Market Traders. This meant traders could only apply for grants of £720 for full time traders and £360 for part time Traders - £360.

Other authorities have provided much higher grants:

Authority	Grant
Southwark	£2500 to £5000
City of London	£700 for one day
Greenwich	£1,500
Islington	Up to £3000
Havering	Sum equivalent to six months' rent for pitch

OSC was informed that Tower Hamlets' approach, while not offering as much money, has been designed to support traders as quickly as possible. Other boroughs have implemented a first come first served basis or require very comprehensive financial records, evidence of continued rental costs and/or spending proposals for grant funds.

This means that many eligible applicants will miss out altogether or awards will take much longer to evaluate and process and may vary greatly from the advertised maximum.

**Recommendation 7:** Ensure market traders are provided with business development support to increase their resilience and if future grants become available better support market traders to ensure their COVID-19 costs are covered in the same way as was offered to other businesses.

## Health and wellbeing

### Recommendations: Food provision

Tower Hamlets came into the pandemic with high but improving levels of deprivation and employment. Since lockdown, there has been an increase in financial hardship from a reduction in income. One of the clearest signs of changing circumstances has been the surge in food bank use and demand for emergency food packages.

First Love Foundation food bank saw a 700% increase in support between 16th March and 14th April 2020 compared to previous year. Additionally, 47% of residents needed help with benefits & 32% were in debt. Job loss from Covid-19 was an influencing factor.

**Recommendation 8:** Support community organisations to ensure vulnerable and isolated residents have adequate access to a hot meal. Where GDPR allows, the Council should collate all the addresses and needs of residents identified with the need for regular hot meals by VCS partners.

**Recommendation 9:** The Council should part fund and work with other funding providers to ensure this need continues to be met by our VCS.

**Recommendation 10:** Further analysis should take place on the causes of need to understand how much was pre-existing and exacerbated by the pandemic, versus how much is new need relating to job losses or social distancing impacting on informal caring networks

### Recommendation 11: Shielding vulnerable residents

A significant number of adult social care users are shielding (1285 as of 9th June), with consequent risks to mental and physical health from stricter social distancing restrictions. OSC was encouraged by the provision in place to support these residents but note that the Council needs to ensure this is sustained as shielding support from government is reduced. OSC was informed that the Council set up a dedicated COVID-19 helpline which focussed on supporting residents that are shielding. Furthermore, a food hub was established at the Professional Development Centre which delivered boxes of food directly to residents who are self-isolating or shielding and awaiting their first government delivery.

The Council engaged 24 VCS food providers including four schools and offer capacity support with funding and access to supplies, so they could meet demand and increase their capacity and offer. From July, residents who were self-isolating and could afford to purchase their own food were referred to the Council webpage which has information on local groceries that offer deliveries or a click and collect service. Volunteers were available to pick up shopping for self-isolating residents'

'click and collect' orders and drop it off to their homes. Residents who could not afford to purchase their own food were referred to local foodbanks to arrange food parcels.

**Recommendation 11:** Maintain and resource local pathways beyond September with Primary Care Networks for shielding in anticipation of subsequent waves.

Recommendation 12: Local test and trace

Dr Jackie Applebee and Dr Naureen Bhatti emphasised the importance of a robust, locally organised, community test, trace and isolate programme to drive the infection and hence death rate down. Countries that have done this from the beginning have done well and New Zealand has managed to all but eliminate the virus. Dr Applebee and Dr Bhatti there are good examples of local systems in the UK which have worked to keep levels of infection down. Independent SAGE is clear that locally based community contact trace programmes are what is needed. OSC is pleased to see that these arrangements are being carefully considered and implemented in the borough. As part of the Local Outbreak Plan, the Health Scrutiny Committee was informed that the Council is working closely with communities to implement a test and trace system which works for everyone in Tower Hamlets, especially those groups that we know are at higher risk of infection and serious complications from infection.

As an example of how this works, over the ten days before the 24th of June there were 13 people with positive tests. Following contact with these individuals, 95 contacts were identified and 93 were contacted. Each of those will have been contacted and been provided advice on whether they need to self-isolate

**Recommendation 12:** Report on the effectiveness/performance/reach of local test, trace, isolate programme as part of the ongoing response to the pandemic – with results reviewed before the winter flu season to reduce the severity of a second wave.

Recommendation 13: Rough sleepers

Tower Hamlets has a higher prevalence of rough sleepers with high support needs. Emergency government & local interventions have had a positive impact, significantly reducing rough sleeping levels in a very short time period and preventing homelessness. The 'Everyone In' scheme, set up to ensure rough sleepers housed in hotels or emergency accommodation and including NRPF, enabled rough sleepers to get health and substance misuse support. The Council has provided suitable self-contained temporary accommodation for rough sleepers - over 200 individuals were placed into emergency accommodation which included more than 40 cases with no recourse to public funds. The Council commissioned 24/7 on-site support and floating support at the commercial hotels as most rough sleepers brought in directly off the streets had complex needs – substance misuse, severe mental health and physical ill health, and, without the required support it would not have been possible to sustain those placements in commercial accommodation. Rough sleepers were accommodated on a full-board basis.

The Committee were informed that the key challenge now is to sustain the positive impact on rough sleepers, mainly due to resource implications of providing ongoing

support. Exit plans may take 12-18 months to come to fruition, and new rough sleepers will be found on streets. Additionally, rough sleepers moving on from current hotel provision with higher needs will need hostels/supported accommodation. These are in short supply & have cost implications. The Council is developing an Exit Plan, which would include developing a single offer for everyone taken in as part of the pandemic, recognising the difficulties that will be encountered for those with No Recourse to Public Funds and the cost implications to the Council. The Council is maximising income by ensuring that rough sleepers claim Housing Benefit.

### **Recommendation 13:**

A. Develop a sustainable approach that delivers the same results keeping rough sleepers off the street. Requesting and lobbying government for funding, including through London Councils.

B. Review the quality of its short-term accommodation, especially in instances where families with children have been placed in accommodation with shared facilities and amenities

C. The Council and its partners should map the increase in referrals and where they came from as well as the paths individuals subsequently took

D. Develop a sustainable approach to support those with No Recourse for Public Funds and lobby government to ensure this group is not left at risk.

### **Recommendation 14: Domestic Violence Support**

The consensus nationally is that the imposed lockdown increased domestic violence abuse as some victims went into lockdown with their abusers. A Women's Aid survey found 67% of survivors currently experiencing abuse said it had got worse since COVID-19, and 78% said COVID-19 had made it harder to leave their abuser. Evidence in Tower Hamlets shows a more nuanced picture, as reports initially indicated that there was a 5% decrease in domestic abuse reported in March and April compared to 2019. A spike in MASH referrals with a domestic abuse component also supports the concerns. It appears that staff interacting with residents is an important mechanism for abuse being detected or disclosed.

**Recommendation 14:** Proactively communicate using a range of channels and community languages the support available for victims of domestic violence and ensure resource is planned to meet potential increase in demand.

### **Recommendation 15: Care Homes**

The impact of COVID-19 on staff and residents in care homes through the epidemic has been substantial. Tower Hamlets has 5 residential & nursing homes -a comparatively small number. As of May, one is rated CQC outstanding, two good, and 2 requires improvement.

The Health Scrutiny Committee was informed of the borough's ambition to ensure all care homes in Tower Hamlets are places with excellent infection control and any risks of outbreaks are identified quickly and contained, as part of the *Tower Hamlets Local Outbreak Plan for COVID-19*. Dr Applebee and Dr Bhatti informed OSC that mortality in care homes has been significant, with some care homes in Tower Hamlets having 37 COVID related deaths (as of 27 May).

The lack of community testing and PPE for care home staff and for key workers in general is likely to have led to unnecessary transmission of the virus. OSC were pleased to hear that this has improved as the pandemic has progressed and support the ambitions put forward in the Local Outbreak Plan. We need to ensure a sustained focus and improvement in this area is delivered.

**Recommendation 15:** That the Health Scrutiny Committee undertake a review of learning of the response to the pandemic by engaging care homes, residents' families and other stakeholders to identify long term recommendations for improvement.

## Children and young people

### Recommendation 16: Recovery for children

Schools and early years provision closed on 20 March 2020 for all but key worker and vulnerable children, and there has been an expectation of home learning for all children since then. Attendance during lockdown remained low (an average of 200 pupils in school, 589 in childcare), especially amongst vulnerable children – but increased week on week. From the Council's COVID-19 resident impact survey we know that schools reopening was one of respondents' top four concerns (24%).

OSC echoes the concerns presented in the *Understanding the Impact of COVID-19 on Tower Hamlets report* that the quality and consistency of supported home learning does not match the classroom and that home learning will be harder for some than others (e.g. harder if no internet access or if in an overcrowded household). For a borough with comparatively high attainment levels and high child poverty levels, the longer-term consequence is that the disruption to education could undermine the gains made in educational achievement to date and widen inequalities.

Building on the issues identified in the Council's Impact report, ELBA highlighted this a prevailing and long-lasting consequence of the epidemic. We will need to help make up for lost time for school and college students. ELBA have heard from schools that disadvantaged pupils are really the ones who are being most impacted – with very low completion rates of the remote work being set.

We will need to help schools and colleges rekindle motivation and confidence for all pupils, particularly those who may have fallen behind. Help will be needed for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are leaving education this summer and in summer 2021 – school, college or university - to enter the jobs market, which will be fiercely competitive. All the factors which placed them at a disadvantage in getting good jobs and careers before, will be amplified post-COVID.

**Recommendation 16:** The recovery programme for children in Tower Hamlets should include the input of specialist teachers. Emphasise not just on 'catch up' but on the social-emotional needs of young people, especially vulnerable children and those with SEND to ensure a successful transition back to school. Schools should be engaged to identify curriculum and attainment gaps and what additional tuition and after school clubs could be conducted to address this.

### Recommendation 17: Free School Meals

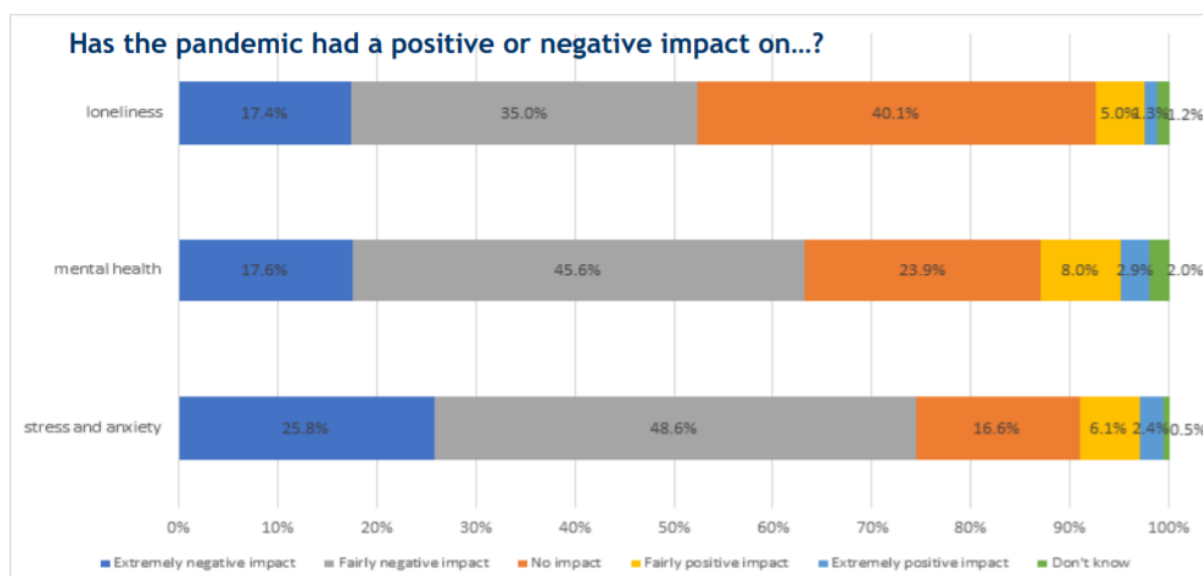
Pre-COVID-19, all primary school children received free school meals. The National Voucher Scheme that has largely replaced free school meals is only going to eligible families.

**Recommendation 17:** That Children's and Education Sub-committee review the rollout of the National Voucher Scheme in TH as an effective replacement for the Council's Universal Free School Meals programme.

### Recommendation 18: Mental health support

The detrimental impact of the lockdown of residents' mental health is a primary concern for OSC given the prevalence of mental health issues was already high as we entered the pandemic. The 'pent up' demand for mental health during lockdown plus new demand has led to London-wide modelling suggesting a 20-30% surge in mental health demand as lockdown eases.

The COVID-19 Resident Impact Survey carried out by Healthwatch Tower Hamlets confirms the variable but overall negative impact of COVID on loneliness (52% report negative impact), stress & anxiety (74% report negative impact), and mental health overall (63% report negative impact).



The Health Scrutiny Committee was informed that young people are more likely to be affected by COVID-19 with anxiety and depression, with factors such as security, housing security and living quality related to the increase.

Number of calls made to the Tower Hamlets Mental Health Crisis line since lockdown: 743 in March, 882 in April, 811 in May Across the areas covered by ELFT, mental health bed occupancy reduced by 60% during lockdown due to reductions in admissions.

Support from the VCS sector can also support tackling isolation and its associated mental health effects. For instance, the food delivery programme delivered by Neighbours in Poplar has reported some of these benefits.

It is vital that Mental Health services do not become overwhelmed and residents get the

**Recommendation 18:**

Young people are more likely to be affected by COVID-19 with anxiety and depression, with factors such as security, housing security and living quality related to the increase.

A. Ensure effective signposting to services such as housing and benefits as quickly as possible.

B. Establish a mental health partnership put in place to co-ordinate remedial plans across relevant sectors like education and housing

**Conclusion**

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee, through this review, recognises the substantial work undertaken to support residents and stakeholders of Tower Hamlets throughout this pandemic. The objective of this review was to ensure through the lens of scrutiny we can capture learning and ensure we can plan for future waves and the through joint working with partners can support the social and economic recovery of the borough.

This report will be sent to Cabinet for the Executive response to our recommendations and we will need to work collaboratively with the Cabinet and partners to ensure actions identified are actioned.