


# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Revisit

London Borough of Tower Hamlets

28<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> September 2021

Feedback report





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# 1. Executive summary

Tower Hamlets continues to make good progress on its improvement journey. The Mayor clearly demonstrates his understanding of community needs through active engagement, and the Council continually strives to improve the lives of residents. The Mayor provides a stable and community focused political leadership along with his capable and energetic Cabinet Members, who together, are focused on their ambitions for the Place. Members and Officers understand their communities and work alongside them. There is a strong and cohesive Senior Leadership Team well led by the Chief Executive with good member-officer relationships. Partnership working came to the fore during the pandemic and continues to strengthen for the benefit of residents and partners are strongly committed to the ambitions of the Place. The Council responded well to the Covid-19 Pandemic and continues to work to improve services for residents and businesses. There are recommendations for further improvement in the following.

## 2. Key recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

### **2.1. Recommendation 1**

A clear understanding of the Mayor's priorities for all and a continued focus on delivery within clear timescales.

### **2.2. Recommendation 2**

It is imperative to continue the work currently underway to close previous years' accounts as a matter of urgency, and to have procedures in place to prevent a recurrence of the late or delayed sign off.

### **2.3. Recommendation 3**

Continue to improve and embed the Council's governance, including decision-making

and scrutiny arrangements, the TOWER values and compliance with the Constitution.

#### **2.4. Recommendation 4**

Continue to strengthen the senior leadership team by completing the current recruitment programme.

#### **2.5. Recommendation 5**

Accelerate the delivery of your communication strategy and face-to-face contact with residents and businesses.

#### **2.6. Recommendation 6**

Speed up the return to a new normal working and further take forward your work on recovery ensuring pace and delivery.

### **3. Summary of the peer challenge approach**

#### **3.1. The peer team**

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were part of the original Corporate Peer Challenge Team in 2018 and were:

- **Dame Mary Ney DBE**, LGA Associate & Non-Executive Director MHCLG
- **Ros Jones CBE**, Mayor of Doncaster MBC
- **Dr Gifty Edila**, LGA Associate, ex-Corporate Director of Legal, HR and Regulatory Services London Borough of Hackney
- **Marcus Coulson**, Programme Manager, Local Government Association

#### **3.2. Scope and focus**

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils' performance

and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

In addition to these questions, you asked the peer team to provide feedback on your scope that was about ***Priority setting and community engagement in a changed local context*** and recommendation one from the 2018 Corporate Peer Challenge which states, ***The Council now needs to grasp opportunities and drive the pace of change to achieve the potential of the place.***

### **3.3. The peer challenge process**

Peer challenges are improvement focused, it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read. They drew on their knowledge of the Council from their previous peer challenge visit.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The

team then spent two days onsite in Tower Hamlets, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 12 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 27 people including a range of elected members, Council staff and external stakeholders.

This Corporate Peer Challenge Revisit was well organised and run and the peer team would like to thank Sharon Godman, Director Strategy, Improvement and Transformation and her team of Afazul Hoque, Daniel Kerr, Clare Matthews and Filuck Miah who supported the peer team before and during the onsite work. Their hard work was very much appreciated.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members with all advice and recommendations given as critical friends in good faith to enable the Council to drive its own improvement.

As part of its ongoing desire for improvement Tower Hamlets have requested a full LGA Corporate Peer Challenge for Autumn 2022 which is now booked in.

## 4. Feedback

### 4.1. Key messages

To deliver this Corporate Peer Challenge Revisit at the London Borough of Tower Hamlets the peer team met and talked with the senior leaders at the Council and discussed their work and leadership of the organisation and the Place since the full Corporate Peer Challenge in June 2018. The review and resulting report was one of the contributing factors towards to then Secretary of State removing the Council's Directions and returning it to business as usual. Tower Hamlets continued on its improvement journey for some time and then in March 2020 the covid-19 pandemic occurred resulting in the policy of national lockdown. This is to a certain extent still ongoing and may continue, or even return, at some future date. Looking at the

documentation provided and from the engagement the peer team has had it is clear that the Council continues to make good progress on its improvement journey.

The Mayor clearly demonstrates his understanding of the needs of the different communities in the Borough through active engagement with them. The Council has shown that it continually strives to improve the lives of residents in as many ways as is possible.

The Mayor provides a stable and community focused political leadership along with his capable and energetic Cabinet Members, who together, are focused on their ambitions for the Place. This is demonstrated by both Elected Members and the Council's Officers understanding their communities and working alongside them.

There is a strong and cohesive Senior Leadership Team well led by the Chief Executive, with all elements of the leadership team describing good member-officer relationships upon which decision-making is based.

Those in the Council reflect that partnership working came to the fore during the pandemic and continues to go from strength to strength for the benefit of residents and businesses and it was made clear to the peer team that partners are strongly committed to the ambitions of the Place.

## **4.2. Key messages - achievements**

### **Covid response**

On the announcement of a pandemic by the World Health Organisation in January 2020, the UK Government initiated a policy of national lockdown in March 2020 to mitigate its effects. In response to the pandemic the Council set about working to support the residents of the Borough from its outset in January 2020 in a variety of ways. To achieve this there was good corporate working across the Council to support public health imperatives and there was a rapid mobilisation by the Council and its partners of all types of staff and initiatives in response to the pandemic. Some positive examples are the support provided to residents who were shielding and providing food for a number of different groups and communities.

There have been innovative campaigns for covid-19 testing and the administering of vaccinations. There was the swift and light touch distribution of many thousands of business support grants free from lengthy bureaucracy and support to young people through the distribution of laptops enabling them to access schoolwork whilst at home.

The Council was able to respond in a fast and flexible way to transition to virtual working for its employees and after a short period a prompt move by the Council to focus on options for recovery from lockdown. These are seen as significant achievements.

#### **4.3. Key messages - achievements**

Since the previous CPC in June 2018 the Council has been involved in a variety of activities and achievements that are worthy of note. The most telling and impactful for the children of the Borough is the improvement in the rating of Children's Services to achieve a 'good' Ofsted in 2019 from the previous rating of 'requires improvement'. This was a great achievement.

There is also the sustained and continued excellence in school achievement for the children and young people in Tower Hamlets.

The partners the peer team spoke with clearly described how trust has been rebuilt with the Council, especially during the last 18 months to support collaboration on a range of different projects and initiatives. The Mayor's Partnership Executive Group is a significant enabler of this process.

The Council is on track to deliver the Mayor's pledge for significant new housing and there has been the successful work of the BAME Commission and the related effective response to Black Lives Matter. The Poverty Commission was cited as an example of effective engagement with partners and there has been a more strategic approach to commissioning, including the way the Voluntary and Community Sector is funded.

The Council has been building new approaches to communication, consultation and engagement with residents both externally and internally with an approach that is



innovative and well organised to achieve clear goals. Partners are keen participants in the new approaches to engagement and promoting the Borough.

#### **4.4. Issues raised during our revisit**

During the peer team's onsite work we heard from a number of stakeholders about issues they experience as important. The following is a summary of the key areas.

The issue of inequality was seen as an important area that the Council needs to address. In particular to take forward the recommendations of the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and the Poverty Commissions to secure equal opportunities for all.

Some representatives see the issue of community safety as important, including a focus on dealing with gangs, knife crime, domestic violence and the safeguarding of children.

It is also important to understand that residents of the Borough and other partners want to see job opportunities for young people and access to good quality employment at all levels, and the promotion of good employment practices to go with them.

The Council needs to continue to work to reduce health inequalities such as the issues of diabetes, child obesity and mental health.

Climate change and pollution were seen as needing serious attention by the Council in such areas due to the rising levels of asthma, and the benefits of local traffic calming schemes, and for some there is a perceived lack of youth provision and accommodation.

The Council may wish to continue to focus on these issues in the ongoing work programme.

#### 4.5. Future direction

Having had a number of discussions with stakeholders whilst onsite the peer team make some recommendations that refer to the future direction of the Council.

The key to achieving immediate successes by the Council is to ensure that there is a clear understanding of the Mayor's priorities for the Borough by the community, Members and officers. This should be widely owned, shared and promoted so that the officers of the Council can ensure there is a focus on then in the present and future through planning and delivery within clear timescales.

It is also imperative to continue the work currently underway to close previous years' accounts as a matter of urgency, and to have procedures in place to prevent a recurrence of the late or delayed sign off.

Continue to improve and embed the Council's governance processes, including the decision-making and scrutiny arrangements, the Council's TOWER values and to ensure compliance with the Constitution.

The Council should continue the recruitment to the key vacant senior leadership team posts to ensure the team is further strengthened and supports its growing cohesiveness for the challenges ahead.

Accelerate the delivery of your communication strategy and face-to-face contact with residents and businesses.

Speed up the return to a new normal and further take forward your work on recovery ensuring pace and delivery. This should include a return to a new work pattern for all staff at Mulberry Place in order to facilitate the continued work to embed a corporate culture and build pace.

## 5. This is what we said in June 2018 and we feel it is still relevant today

*“Tower Hamlets is a diverse and vibrant community with a rich heritage which has huge opportunities*

*The Council is blessed with a healthy financial position and an enviable asset base, the support of strong partners and significant potential to invest and innovate.”*

## 6. Next steps

It is recognised that the senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. This revisit has allowed space for the Council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan, the covid-19 pandemic, other improvement work and discussed next steps.

In the meantime, Kate Herbert, Principal Adviser for London, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Kate is available to discuss any further support the Council requires and is available on email: [kate.herbert@local.gov.uk](mailto:kate.herbert@local.gov.uk), or telephone: 07867 632404.

Thank you for your engagement in this work.

On behalf of the Peer Challenge Team September 2021.

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