

Cabinet 16 May 2024	 TOWER HAMLETS
Report of: Robin Beattie, Acting Director Strategy Improvement and Transformation	Classification: Unrestricted
Tower Hamlets Partnership Review	

Lead Member	Mayor Lutfur Rahman
Originating Officer(s)	Abidah Kamali, Senior Strategy and Policy Officer Afazul Hoque, Head of Corporate Strategy and Communities
Wards affected	All wards
Key Decision?	Yes/No
Reason for Key Decision	[This report has been reviewed as not meeting the Key Decision criteria.
Forward Plan Notice Published	NA
Exempt information	<i>None</i>
Strategic Plan Priority / Outcome	All priorities

Executive Summary

A ‘Tower Hamlets for All’ is our ambitious new Partnership Plan (2023-2028). It is a commitment to seize current opportunities and address the most pressing challenges for residents and the borough through partnership collaboration and leadership. This report presents the headline findings and draft recommendations from the review of our partnership arrangements, so that our partnership working is set up to achieve our collective ambitions. It proposes to streamline partnership efforts and improve focus to achieve transformational change aligned with community, partner, and council aspirations.

The review was led by a task and finish group (TFG) of the Partnership Executive Group (PEG) with the Council represented by Warwick Tomsett as vice chair of the TFG. We heard from partners that the review process has helped build trust and deepened understanding of levers, opportunities and blockers to partnership working. However, how far we can achieve transformational aims will depend on focus and resourcing.

Recommendations:

The Mayor in Cabinet is recommended to:

1. Agree review recommendations (section 3.15), and guiding principles for thematic partnerships, ahead of consideration by the Partnership Executive Group (PEG) in May.

1 REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS

- 1.1 The Tower Hamlets Partnership is on a journey of transformation and improvement. In autumn 2023, it agreed to a new shared vision and Partnership Plan (2023-2028) for the borough. This new ambitious plan demonstrates the council's commitment to partnership and leadership of place, and as a starting point initiates progress towards two key recommendations made by the Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge, 2023.
- 1.2 However, initial feedback from partners and the council suggests that the current ways of working of the Partnership aren't meeting their needs. There are too many partnerships sitting under the PEG, and its thematic partnerships (for example subgroups). There is a collective view that the partnership structure may require simplification and improvements in joined-up working. The PEG agreed to review partnership arrangements and this report presents the findings and recommendations for consideration.

2 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 2.1 **Do nothing** - If the cabinet fails to consider the key findings from the review and the Task and Finish Group's recommendations, this will demonstrate noncompliance with recommendations 1 and 7 of the Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge feedback report (as outlined in section 3.7 of this report), with risk of poor prioritisation and reputational damage. This could also damage relationships and hinder the Tower Hamlets Partnership's ability to seek collective agreement from its strategic partners on focus, transformational change and improvements to ways of working. Resulting in missed opportunities to strengthen partnership working in Tower Hamlets to tackle social challenges, for growth and socio-economic development, and social mobility.

3 DETAILS OF THE REPORT

Local Strategic Partnership

- 3.1 Community leadership is at the heart of the role of a modern local authority. The Tower Hamlets Partnership (hereafter referred to as the 'Partnership') is

a broad coalition of local institutions with shared vision and commitment to tackling inequalities and stronger public services.

- 3.2 Inequality and poverty are at the heart of the challenges and social issues that our residents face. The Partnership is determined to tackle this head-on, putting our communities first and placing equality, fairness, and justice at the heart of everything we do.
- 3.3 The council and partners value the strength of partnership working and relationships in Tower Hamlets - and the impact of this.

A Journey of Improvement

- 3.4 The council is on a journey of learning, improvement and innovation, taking a community-first and empowered communities approach that is shared with partners. As a learning organisation, the council's new Target Operating Model (TOM) sets out a vision to 'Create a more efficient, effective, and responsive public sector organisation that is better able to meet the needs of its communities'. However, we know that we can't do this alone. Through a set of improvement principles, a shared strategic vision and ambition, pooling shared resources and sharing expertise, we aim to deliver better public services in partnership so that inequalities are reduced and the quality of life of our communities is improved.
- 3.5 Initiated by the council the partnership's journey of improvement began in 2022. Starting with a priority-setting exercise across the partnership, partnership self-assessments, review of executive group terms of reference, and the development of a new partnership plan for the borough and system-wide improvement principles to guide the way we work together. The new partnership plan and partnership review continue this work.

A Tower Hamlets for All - our new Partnership Plan

- 3.6 In November 2023, Cabinet and the PEG agreed to a new shared vision and Partnership Plan (2023-2028) for the borough 'A Tower Hamlets for All'. Through five cross-cutting calls to action, this Partnership Plan supports a focused strategic partnership effort to seize new opportunities and address through partnership collaboration the challenges and ambitions of our residents. It works through the activities of all the partners, taking a systems approach, coordinating and facilitating improvements and joining up work where needed. Through building partnership objectives into their strategic plans, partners agreed to communicate and challenge each other as organisations and partnership boards to raise standards and tackle the most difficult issues.

Partnership Congress

- 3.7 Twice yearly thematic partnership congresses are introduced to engage a wide range of local partners and residents around key administration priorities – the first congress in November 2023 focused on community safety, co-

producing a charter to improve outcomes around crime and anti-social behaviour. The next congress in summer 2024 will focus on developing a new strategic vision for the borough.

Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge feedback

- 3.8 The 2021 LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Revisit noted the importance of the partnership response to the pandemic and the partners' strong commitment to a shared ambition for Tower Hamlets. The most recent 2023 LGA Corporate Peer Challenge considered the local authority's 'Leadership of Place' role and its relationships with partners and external stakeholders. It acknowledged the strength of relationships between the council and statutory partners. This includes the good quality health partnerships and the council's community safety work which is considered 'sector leading' by the police. The review made two key recommendations. As a starting point, the new Partnership Plan and Partnership review initiate progress toward these recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Strategic Vision

Develop a more comprehensive long-term strategic vision for the borough and the council which is co-produced with the community.

Recommendation 7: Working with Partners

To ensure more effective partnership working, the council should consider reviewing current partnership governance arrangements.

Partnership Review

- 3.9 In October 2023, the PEG created a task and finish (TFG) group to review partnership arrangements of the Partnership. Initial feedback from partners and the council suggested that current ways of working aren't meeting needs. There are too many partnerships sitting under the PEG and its thematic partnerships (for example subgroups). There is a collective view that the partnership structure may require simplification and improvements in joined-up working.
- 3.10 The TFG was chaired by Ian Parkes (East London Business Alliance) and Sufia Alam (East London Mosque & London Muslim Centre/Inter-Faith Forum), Warwick Tomsett (LBTH), with representation from the Partnership Executive Group and most partnerships, supported by Council Officers.
- 3.11 The purpose of the review is to a) simplify the structure; b) improve focus; c) strengthen accountability and 4) promote transformational partnership working and collaboration. Its objective is to set the Partnership up to achieve the ambitions of our new Partnership Plan, streamline partnership efforts, and focus on achieving transformational change aligned with community, partner and council aspirations.
- 3.12 The Partnership Review has focused on the PEG and the thematic partnership layer directly underneath this. The review findings and recommendations have been co-produced with the TFG and partnership boards.

Headline findings

3.13 We heard a wide range of suggestions to improve partnership working across key themes.

- **Definition:** the partnership is broad and complex. We need to strengthen joint planning and senior representation to ensure horizontal co-ordination across the partnership, to improve alignment and focus.
- **Communication:** happens informally through multiple stakeholders attending the same meetings. Partnership chairs need to address this through a clear engagement strategy.
- **Accountability:** maintain informal, trust-based partnerships as opposed to a formal accountability framework.
- **Community representation:** This will look different for different partnerships, there is best practice to learn from in the Statutory Boards. The Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy will be renewed shortly and is an opportunity to further develop our approach.

3.14 We also heard that transformational partnership working involves:

- senior commitment
- strategic prioritisation
- effective risk management
- research and evidence integration
- and the utilisation of shared resources

Workshop participants felt that our key barriers include:

- resource limitations
- conflicting priorities
- lack of sustained focus and
- equitable representation within the partnership.

Draft Recommendations

3.15 The TFG proposes five key recommendations to strengthen strategic focus and leverage partnerships to achieve transformational impact, improving resident lives. However, how far we can achieve transformational aims will depend on clear focus and resourcing.

3.16 The recommendations (R), supported by an action plan and guiding principles for thematic partnerships are detailed in Appendix A. A summary is outlined below.

R1 - Reform the Partnership Executive Group (PEG):

- Focus efforts on a small number of strategic priorities aligned with partnership priorities and the long-term strategic vision for the borough, strengthen the political interface and optimize the Mayor's time for strategic engagement in local transformation.

- **R2- Tackle Duplication and Improve Focus:** Initiate annual joint planning for whole system working and coordination, partnership improvement (guiding principles), transitions to task and finish groups, and strengthen the relationship between health partnerships.
- **R3 - Develop Distributed Leadership:** A consistent joint chairing arrangement to promote shared and sector leadership and stronger engagement with partners improving partnership practice. This includes board members having clear and defined roles underpinned through the terms of reference and work programmes, improving overall governance of the partnership, and considering a dispersed model for non-statutory boards for partnership effectiveness and sustainability.
- **R4 - Create an Equitable, Inclusive, and Accountable Partnership:** Promote inclusive decision-making and equity, improve resident voice and community representation (including voluntary and community sector and faith communities), and ensure statutory accountability frameworks are adhered to and risks managed, initiating PEG spotlights on cross-cutting priorities for collective action.
- **R5: Improve Communications and Engagement:** Strengthen relationships and improve communication and collaboration outside of meetings, enhance the borough's reputation, and showcase the impact of partnership initiatives.

Research and Evidence

- 3.17 Partners are keen to ensure that decisions are based on the best possible evidence so that shared resources help those people in our communities who need it most.
- 3.18 Partners have expressed eagerness to align partnership objectives with collaborative research through the Health Determinants Research Collaboration to tackle the wider determinants of health. Starting with for example the HDRC research priority of housing. A real asset to improving the efficacy and outcomes of partnerships and reducing inequalities.

Stakeholder Engagement

- 3.19 An extensive engagement process has shaped and tested review findings and recommendations. This includes the review TFG, PEG, a workshop in January with partnership stakeholders, Council Directors, chairs of partnership boards and the council's Transformation Advisory Board. 1:1 meetings with key stakeholders including statutory partners and Lead Members, some of whom felt that statutory partnerships are currently working well where relationships are strong, and priorities are evidence-led and joined up.

A changing policy landscape

- 3.20 The review has considered recent changes to bring policy and partnership arrangements into line with statutory, and national government requirements. For example:
- The evolved role of the Tower Hamlets Together Board following the Health and Care Act 2022. An Integrated Care System is now in place in North East London. THT now operates as a subcommittee within this system, reporting into the local Health and Wellbeing Board and Integrated Care Board under the NHS Accountability Framework.
 - The Community Safety Partnership and its members will be expected to meet the requirements of a Serious Violence Duty introduced through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022.
 - A local Combatting Drugs Partnership has been formed in line with the requirements of the Government's 10-year drugs plan 'From harm to hope'. This partnership reports into the Community Safety Partnership and the Health and Wellbeing Board.
 - Specific reviews and task forces that look at priority areas including homelessness, damp and mould, and crime reduction.

Benchmarking

- 3.21 The review researched partnership arrangements across different places. Findings suggest that developing stronger partnerships is an increasingly high priority, especially for areas struggling to balance their budgets.
- 3.22 Most focus executive partnership more tightly on particular thematic areas than LBTH e.g. Waltham Forest on a housing compact; Camden on inclusive growth and children; Southwark on land and assets for public benefit; Hackney's theory of change in regeneration and economic development; Newham's community wealth building board supporting business; and Essex's time-limited mission networks.

Areas recommend:

- Identifying meaningful and actionable outputs and outcomes is a consistent challenge at partnership level – this is due to a tendency to focus either on specific performance measures or on aspirational but unmeasurable collective objectives.
 - Recognising the political challenges and moving on from the unsolvable to focus on those areas where collective agreement is easier to achieve.
 - Prioritising around practical assets and resources that the partners have direct control over as well as external opportunities.
 - Separating the 'away from the table' (ie operational) discussions from the partnership approach (ie strategic) and plan the work programme accordingly.
- 3.23 The review has also since looked at the learning and insights from the DLUC Partnerships for People and Place (PfPP) programme aimed to revolutionise how government departments engage in 'place-based' policy design and implementation to address social policy challenges, where closer coordination between central and local government was deemed beneficial.

- 3.24 The PfPP programme identified five common barriers to effective place-based working across, 1) Complex structures that are difficult to navigate, 2) priorities that are often misaligned; 3) Labour-intensive, complex, and competitive funding programmes; 4) Real and perceived restrictions on data sharing; and 5) a culture where open and collaborative place-based working is not the norm.

Key recommendations derived from successful case studies include:

- Adapting strategies to fit the existing landscape and needs of the community.
- Realigning priorities to focus on mutual benefits and shared objectives.
- Fostering collaboration among stakeholders.
- Overcoming barriers through innovative approaches and persistence to achieve successful outcomes.

- 3.25 In addition, key lessons and recommendations from the Power of People, Partnerships and Place– Place-based giving schemes in London, a collaboration across various sectors such as public, private, and voluntary to address community needs, include the importance of realistic planning, building trust through collaboration, and recognising the value of long-term investment in capacity-building.

4 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Inequality and poverty are at the heart of the challenges and social issues that our residents face. The Tower Hamlets Partnership is determined to tackle this head-on, putting our communities first and placing equality, fairness, and justice at the heart of everything we do. The recommendations from the partnership review will help tackle inequalities and strengthen partnership working so that everyone can benefit from the social, cultural and economic wealth of the borough.
- 4.2 The Partnership Plan and partnership review will enhance outcomes for different protected characteristics, supporting the council's equality objectives set out in priority six of the council's Strategic Plan 2022-26.

5 OTHER STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 This section of the report is used to highlight further specific statutory implications that are either not covered in the main body of the report or are required to be highlighted to ensure decision makers give them proper consideration. Examples of other implications may be:
- Best Value Implications,
 - Consultations,
 - Environmental (including air quality),
 - Risk Management,
 - Crime Reduction,
 - Safeguarding.

- Data Protection / Privacy Impact Assessment.

5.2 Best value authorities are under a general Duty of Best Value to “make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness”. The partnership plan and partnership review supports this duty through leadership of place, partnership collaboration, and review and implementation of system-wide improvement principles and guiding principles for thematic partnerships. Thereby streamlining efforts and improving ways of working, creating efficiencies for the council and across the partnership, whilst delivering better outcomes for the borough and its people.

6 COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER

6.1 The report sets out several recommendations around partnerships. Implementation of any recommendations will need to be delivered from existing resources. Should additional funding be required this will need to be approved through the relevant governance process.

7 COMMENTS OF LEGAL SERVICES

7.1. The Council has the legal power to undertake the actions recommended in this report. Otherwise, there are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents

Linked Report

- List any linked reports

Appendices

- Appendix A: Tower Hamlets Partnership Review – A summary report

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

- NONE.

Officer contact details for documents:

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