

Executive Mayor's Office

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Dear Secretary of State,

I am writing to you regarding the first update report on all outstanding actions in the Best Value Action Plan and Best Value Improvement Plan 2017-18. Enclosed at Appendix One is a summary of the progress report presented at the Best Value Improvement Board on 14th June 2017.

Before I update you on the Best Value Improvement Plan, I wanted reflect on the tragic events at Grenfell Tower in Kensington. The fire is a devastating reminder of the importance of fire safety in residential blocks of flats. In an immediate response to the tragedy my Council arranged for donation points to be set up across the borough and has sent a number of staff to Kensington to support residents affected by the fire.

Tower Hamlets has many blocks of flats of more than six storeys and my focus has been to deal with the local concerns of residents about the resilience of our fire safety arrangements and have instructed officers to review the safety of high-rise tower blocks.

I was deeply shocked and devastated to see the speed and ferocity with which the Grenfell Tower fire took hold. It has rightly caused us to question some of our assumptions about the materials used and the resilience of our safety plans. We will learn more from the public inquiry but I want to reassure you that we are addressing the immediate concerns it has raised.

BEST VALUE IMPROVEMENT PLAN PROGRESS UPDATE

I have established and chaired the first two meetings of the Best Value Improvement Board. The Board's role is to drive sustainable improvement across the organisation and provide oversight, support and challenge. It is attended by Cabinet Members, opposition group leaders as well as by Sir Steve Bullock, Mayor of Lewisham Council, and a representative of the Local Government Association (LGA). These meetings have been informative and challenging, helping to build momentum and consensus for further discussions in the year ahead.

A Forward Plan which sets out the key issues to be brought before the Board over the next nine months was agreed at the second meeting. These include actions within the Best Value Improvement Plan, such as reviewing the quarterly update reports to the Secretary of State, working with the LGA on a peer review, as well as spotlight sessions on the key priority areas.

A summary of the progress made implementing the actions from the Best Value Board are outlined below with more detail found at Appendix One. The Board highlighted the need to widen the scope of its work and I have commissioned a report to identify where the Council should focus its attention in the year ahead, which I have defined as developing a broader position setting the challenges and changes needed on our wider 'journey to excellence' as an Authority.

CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE

The Best Value Improvement Board received a report from the Independent Chair of the new Children's Services Improvement Board, set up after the Ofsted inspection. A first task of this Board has been to understand why this happened to children's social care in Tower Hamlets so that I can be assured the improvement activity is appropriately focused. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is in the process of developing its work programme for the year ahead and it is my understanding that children's social care will be a prominent feature. At my Cabinet meeting on 27th June, I published a summary of the Council's improvement plan, and a more detailed Children's Services Improvement Plan is being developed, which will be submitted to the Secretary of State for Education by 20th July 2017.

ELECTIONS

Significant progress has been made in delivering elections. The Council has successfully delivered a number of elections and the referendum since 2015 including the 2017 UK Parliamentary Election, which saw over 19,000 additions to the register (between 6 April - 9 June) and a 5% increase in voter turnout in each of the borough's constituencies. Measures were put in place to ensure non-intimidation of voters, such as additional privacy barriers being placed within each of the booths at polling stations. Preparations continue for the 2018 Mayoral and local elections, with the annual canvass being undertaken between July-Nov 2017 and the Revised Register of Electors 2018 to be published December 2017.

You will note from the officer report that my Returning Officer had made it very clear that our involvement in any voter ID pilot depended on early announcement and agreement by the Cabinet Office to the scope and nature of the local pilot. At the Best Value Improvement Board on 14th June my Returning Officer mentioned that when this was discussed with the Commissioners there was agreement that this needed to be clarified by June at the very latest, and the Commissioners agreed this would be an absolute minimum notice. My Returning Officer's conclusion is that, with events, not least the General Election, intervening, there is now insufficient time to implement a new voter ID pilot scheme without significant risk to the success of the administration of the 2018 Mayoral and local elections. The Returning Officer has concluded that he cannot now risk introducing a substantial change in practice at the polling stations. I understand my Returning Officer has now met with Cabinet Office officials and explained his decision to withdraw the Tower Hamlets expression of interest to be a pilot in 2018. He has, however, offered to continue to assist the Government in the introduction of measures to increase the safety of the elections process.

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

The organisational culture is recognised as a key component in moving the Council forward and continues to change. A series of engagement events were completed over the last 6 months to develop a new set of core values with staff and elected members. There is a strong focus on management and leadership of the Council with the establishment of a Leadership Development Programme, including online resources, peer-to-peer coaching, qualification training and external partnerships.

Whistleblowing activities have been completed to address any remaining issues and an independent review of whistleblowing processes and procedures is underway. Finally, the 'Clear up Project' has been completed with the report and recommendations presented to Cabinet in June 2017 with implementation following that.

GRANTS

Substantial progress has been made in relation to grants management. All actions in the original Grants Best Value Action Plan have been completed. Work has been undertaken to review and develop approaches to, and processes for, grant making with the Grants Determination Sub-committee. The Grants Scrutiny Sub-Committee continues to provide cross party elected members review and challenge to the grants decision making process. A review of the Third Sector Team has been completed and a new structure finalised. Commissioning of the community cohesion theme is complete with mobilisation taking place in the next quarter.

PROPERTY

Considerable improvement has been seen regarding property. The fitting out work for the first Community Hub building will be complete shortly and this building will be opened and made available for sessional use. Two additional hubs are also being considered. All vacant community buildings that could be converted to residential use have been handed back to Housing Management to progress. Two planning applications have been submitted to date.

COMMUNICATIONS

In communications, we have launched a weekly staff newsletter to staff with a current open rate of 50%, completed procurement of providers for publication of statutory notices including local providers such as East London Advertiser and developed a Communication Strategy for 2017-18, which will further develop communication channels and targeting of information to internal and external audience. The focus going forward is to continue to change the culture about communications, with the aim of opening the Council up to let the communications team know of delivery milestones and other activity in a planned way. This is a central theme of the Communications Strategy and an internal communications campaign will be launched shortly to support the strategy.

The work across these areas demonstrates real progress that has been made since my election. A critical theme underpinning all our improvement work is building trust and ensuring transparency. In this area the Council is growing in confidence and maturity to act transparently and be trusted to take informed decisions. Examples of this include; organising the Mela, which attracted over 45,000 visitors, identifying two vacant community buildings for housing use, Bethnal Green Cottage and 10 Turin Street, and three meetings of the Tower Hamlets Strategic Partnership have been held with a work programme being developed to support place shaping of the borough.

Our greater confidence and ability to deliver is reflected in the results of the annual Resident's Survey 2017 in which 79% said they trusted the Council 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' - up 7 percentage points on last year, and well above the trust rating for Councils nationally of 59%. In addition, 59% agreed that the Council is 'open and transparent about its activities' - up 7 percentage points on last year. Resident satisfaction also increased by 6 points to 72% which is higher than the LGA average.

The work undertaken so far builds on what was set out to you in my last report in March. We have maintained momentum and in the next 3-6 months there will be an increase in the pace of change, especially in relation to children's services. As agreed with the Commissioners and discussed at the Best Value Improvement Board I will be attending the LGA conference next month to speak about the experience of, and lessons learned, of Government intervention in local authorities.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Biggs', written in a cursive style.

John Biggs
Executive Mayor of Tower Hamlets