

Executive Mayor's Office

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Dear Secretary of State,

I am pleased to enclose the second update report on outstanding actions in the Best Value Improvement Plan 2017-18. Enclosed at appendix one is a summary of the progress report presented to the Best Value Improvement Board on 11th September 2017.

I am committed to deliver continuous and sustained improvement across my Council. I am confident that progress is being made in key areas but remain realistic about the challenges I face now and in the future. The Chief Executive and I want the Council to be excellent and our intention is to modernise the organisation ensuring citizens are at the heart of everything we do.

I welcome the recent feedback received from Ofsted following their first visit at the end of August 2017 which recognised the progress we have made, especially in the multi-agency safeguarding hub and assessment and intervention teams. I recognise that any early progress remains fragile and will need determined leadership and effort to embed and sustain going forward. I am absolutely clear this is the start of a journey and I will continue to demand the improvements necessary to ensure the children of my borough are safe.

I know my Returning Officer is committed to delivering a successful local election in 2018 and as part of the Cabinet Office pilot has offered to take part in the scheme to secure improved arrangements for postal voting and is participating in the advisory group for the pilots. My Returning Officer and supporting team are not complacent and understand the challenges of preparing for the local election in 2018. They are working with partners including central government to ensure they can build on the success they have had delivering a number of recent elections.

I continue to strengthen leadership across the Council, and, with my Chief Executive, working closely with our partners across the Borough. I chair the strategic partnership holding regular meetings that focus on our development as a team as well as preparing a new community plan for the borough. I am committed to strengthening relationships between partners and working across systems and organisations to improve outcomes for local people.

Recently, I approved changes to strengthen the Council's existing arrangements for property and grants reflecting a growing confidence to utilise our assets in a much more strategic and transparent way than in the past.

BEST VALUE IMPROVEMENT PLAN PROGRESS UPDATE

The Best Value Improvement Board met for the third time in September 2017 focusing on progress in delivering the Best Value Improvement Plan. The Board also considered a report detailing our

Improvement Journey to date and work we need to focus on in enabling us to become an excellent Council. This identified customer services as an important cross cutting issue for the organisation and in our drive to be efficient and transformative it is crucial that we do not lose the emphasis on customer care. Organisational culture is second area which has been an on-going focus through the Best Value Action Plans and the Best Value Improvement Plan and as we complete key actions it is important for us to understand the impact and also how we move to become an excellent Council taking our staff on this journey.

In association with the Local Government Association we have also agreed an approach to the 'Independent Review' as required by the March 2017 Directions. This will be done through the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge in June 2018 and will provide sense of our achievements and areas of on-going work. We will give further thought to the focus we think this review should take, although this must at least include some scrutiny of the priority areas of the Best Value Plan. We will discuss this further with your officials.

A summary of the progress made implementing the actions from the Best Value Improvement Plan are outlined below with more detail found at appendix one.

CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE

Since the last update we have submitted our Children's Services Improvement Plan to the Secretary of State for Education and Ofsted in July 2017. The plan responds directly to the 15 recommendations identified in the Ofsted inspection report. It is an operational tool used by managers and frontline staff to drive our improvement activity which, crucially, focuses on the impact changes will have for vulnerable children. The Council is supported by improvement partners appointed by the Department for Education. These are senior officers from Lincolnshire and Islington councils - both of which have achieved 'good' ratings from Ofsted. We have set an ambitious plan for the Council to achieve a 'good' rating by April 2019 and have supported this through an additional £5.2m to the Children's Services budget. At the Best Value Improvement Board we received an update against the four themes detailed in the Improvement Plan and it was pleasing to note the progress that has been made in ensuring a good and legally compliant level of social work practice. Alongside this the use of robust performance management child level data and quality assurance processes that feed directly into improved service delivery and better outcomes for children.

I am disappointed with the coverage of the Council recently received regarding a fostering arrangement. This received widespread national attention and, naturally, caused us some concern. I welcome the decision by the Family Court to put right the unhelpful misinterpretation of information. I respect and appreciate the work done by our diverse foster carers who are qualified people with vast experience of looking after children.

My Council's priority will continue to be placing children in a caring and safe environment and while cultural background is always a significant consideration in making this decision, so too are other factors including remaining in the local area to promote contact with the child's family and for the child to continue at the same school in order to give them as much stability as possible. We have corresponded separately with the Minister of State for Children and Families.

PROPERTY

I opened the first of our community Hubs, in Christian Street E1, in September 2017. This is following a decision I took in November 2016 to improve usage and access for community facilities for the diverse range of voluntary and community organisations in the borough. We have worked collaboratively with the sector to design this hub and will build on this for the opening of future hubs.

Planning consent has been granted for conversion to residential use for two vacant community buildings and a planning application has been submitted for a further property, which is temporarily being used by a community organisation. There is further on-going work on property as detailed in appendix one.

As regards our new Civic Centre, the planning application will be submitted in October 2017 and the project remains on target. We are working closely with Tower Hamlets CCG and Tower Hamlets Homes to maximise efficiency and enable us to realise the benefits of co-location.

In July this year at the Grants Determination sub-committee, I agreed to extend the scope of the review of Council owned community buildings occupied by voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations. On 1 November 2016, decisions were made with the intention of providing a fair, open and transparent framework to guide the Council's future relationship with our VCS organisations occupying its premises. The report focussed on premises held within the Council's community building portfolio. However, there are a number of Council owned buildings used by VCS organisations which do not fall within that portfolio. In order to ensure consistency of the Council's approach to organisations using its premises, it has been necessary to extend the premises review to include all such premises. I anticipate the full review being completed by December 2017 and implemented with effect from 1 April 2018 building on the work started under the Commissioners.

GRANTS

I continue to lead the Grants Determination Sub-Committee which meets every six weeks to make decision on grants. Our work is supported by the Grants Scrutiny Sub-Committee which is now chaired by an opposition councillor providing additional challenge to the decision making process. This Committee have developed their work programme for the year and will be undertaking a review of youth sports funding in the borough.

As part of the Voluntary & Community Sector Strategy we agreed that the Council would move to a commissioning approach and we have now completed the commissioning of one theme - for community cohesion - awarding contracts for the value of £144k pa.

In September I approved an extension to the Council's Mainstream Grants (MSG) by seven months to 31 March 2019 for those funded projects which are performing satisfactorily. This will allow sufficient time for the successor funding programme to be developed through a process of co-production with stakeholders and bring the programme into line with the financial year, the development of our grants policy and commissioning strategy. I am committed to make sure the sector has a clear role in developing this.

A restructure of our Third Sector Team is nearing completion and we continue to work with staff to finalise this. New grants software (Gifts on-line) will go live later this year which will enable more transparent reporting on grants awards and performance and will be accessible through the Council's website.

ELECTIONS

Review of the delivery of the 2017 UK Parliamentary Election has taken place and lessons learnt from this are being incorporated for the 2018 elections. A project group involving key partners continues to meet on a regular basis to plan for the 2018 elections. Work has started on the annual canvass for the Revised Register of Electors for 2018 which will be published in December 2017.

The Returning Officer has now confirmed that the Council will not take part in the voter ID pilot scheme. At the Best Value Improvement Board meeting the Returning Officer set out that 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. My Returning Office is not prepared to risk introducing a substantial change in practice at the polling stations. His work, quite properly, is separate from any risk of political interference. He has informed the Cabinet Office of the pilot to secure postal voting being implemented locally.

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

As I mentioned at the beginning of the letter elements of the organisational culture will be a focus for the Best Value Improvement Board in future meetings. During the last three months we have continued to engage with staff on our new core values and work will commence over the next six months to ensure this is embedded in the organisation. Preparations are on-going for the Council to be assessed against the Investors In People Accreditation. The Tower Hamlets Strategic Partnership is developing a new Community Plan for the borough which will set out our longer term vision and priorities and how we can collectively shape and improve Tower Hamlets. The new Monitoring Officer started with the Council in July and is leading on completing the review of the Council's constitution. Finally, we are continuing with the permanent recruitment of a small remaining number of senior officers to vacant or interim posts.

COMMUNICATIONS

The staff newsletter Tower Hamlets Now has an open rate of 63% and enables us to communicate key messages to staff on a regular basis. Our work utilising a campaigns model is building momentum with four new campaigns launched this quarter. We continue to work with departments to ensure communication is better planned and targeted and the media consumption survey which has recently been completed will enable us to communicate information to difference audiences more effectively.

In summary, at our Best Value Improvement Board we have continued to review progress against agreed milestones and while there are some areas where work has progressed slowly I am determined to ensure delivery of the plan within the financial year. I have started planning for 2018-19 and am currently reviewing the Council's strategy and budget to set the Council's direction and priorities for 2018 - 21 and ensure our focus remains on delivering excellent services which improve outcomes for local people. Please be assured that this remains a priority and that there will be no 'foot off the pedal' in securing the improvements and progress we need to make.

Finally, I reiterate that I am committed to improving my Council and will provide the leadership needed to achieve the excellence that I and my Chief Executive seek to deliver.

Yours sincerely



John Biggs
Executive Mayor of Tower Hamlets