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Dear Secretary of State,

I am pleased to enclose the third update report on outstanding actions in the Best Value Action Plans and 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 18<sup>th</sup> December 2017.

As we start a new year, it seems an opportune time to look forwards to the challenges ahead and reaffirm that I remain fully committed to delivering the continuous and sustained improvement across my council that the citizens of Tower Hamlets expect and deserve. Our progress so far and our plans for the future are evidence of the commitment of the whole authority to deliver high quality services in a way that serves our community.

## **BEST VALUE IMPROVEMENT PLAN PROGRESS UPDATE**

The Best Value Improvement Board met in December 2017 focusing on progress in delivering the Best Value Improvement Plan. The board also received update reports on Children's Services, Property, Customer Service and Organisational Culture.

I am pleased to note that our work in Children's Services following the recent Ofsted inspection continues to be moving in a positive direction although we remain fully aware that must maintain a firm focus and effort in this area backed up by strong corporate leadership. As with all areas of our improvement journey, we acknowledge the need and desire to put our customers at the heart of everything we do.

We are moving forward with our plans for an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge in June. This will serve the double purpose of providing an Independent Review as set out in the March 2017 Directions and enabling us to identify successes and opportunities to build on the work we are already doing. I will keep you updated with the plans for the review as they develop further.

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.

## **ELECTIONS**

I mentioned in my last letter that further measures were being taken to secure postal voting and as part of our ongoing commitment to improved election services, we have agreed to take part in the Cabinet

Office Postal Vote Pilot scheme. Hopefully this should go some way to addressing the concerns that had been previously highlighted in this area and we will look to build in milestones for this pilot in our action planning going forward. Clearly, as an elected representative with an interest in the elections, I have no direct role in election administration, and this matter is being led by our Chief Executive, who is also our Returning Officer, who has been working with our officials.

Following the review of the delivery of the 2017 UK Parliamentary Election, steps are being taken to ensure the success and smooth running of the 2018 elections. These include the provisional booking of the Excel Exhibition Centre as the count centre which is ideal, and will better be able to manage the intense interest in our election than other more local potential venues. Additional training for Presiding Officers (due to be identified in January) and police officers is being planned including the development of visual aids which will also be made available at polling stations to help overcome any language difficulties with voters.

Regular review and planning meetings continue to be held between officers and the Police to assess and mitigate risks and potential concerns and consultation work with the Electoral Commission Office has also been undertaken. The revised Register of Electors was published as planned on 1<sup>st</sup> December following the annual canvass.

Past elections, particularly that in 2014 which led to the Election Court and subsequent disqualifications, remind us that there must be a continuing risk in the behaviour of elected members and candidates, and potentially in the conduct of helpers and this must therefore continue to be a concern. The Postal Voting pilot, together with attention to the training and preparation for the election and count are being conducted with these risks in mind. My Chief Executive is I believe confident the council's systems are now resilient enough to better manage the elections, with greater resilience, than in 2014.

## **COMMUNICATIONS**

Following improvements made to the layout and content of the staff newsletter Tower Hamlets Now, we have a slightly improved open rate of 64%. We are continuing to monitor the most popular articles to identify the most effective way to communicate key information to our workforce.

We have procured the Gov Delivery E-Newsletter system in order to consolidate our newsletters through one portal and enable residents to receive information that is pertinent to them and their interests as well as structuring communications around campaigns. This, along with our improved understanding of residents' media consumption habits obtained through a recent survey, will help us efficiently deliver key messages to a receptive audience. We have replaced our weekly newspaper with a quarterly publication, compliant with the DCLG Code, and a wider campaigns based approach to communications resulting in strong engagement and dissemination of clear, focussed information as evidenced by a range of media and information campaigns designed to inform and engage local people and partners. I am confident that this represents a positive way forwards for and a resolution to past concerns about our Communications.

## **CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE**

We have continued to progress our Improvement Plan in response to the recent Ofsted inspection findings. As agreed, there is an improvement programme which is largely overseen by our internal processes, our Independently chaired Improvement Board, our Improvement Partners and overseen by continuing periodic Ofsted inspections. At a high level, this programme reports to my Best Value Improvement Board (BVIB).

In summary, we have examined and cleansed data from across all areas of the service to provide a more robust oversight of our services as well as taking control of data quality going forward. Governance and performance management arrangements have also been structured with sampling and service visits by senior managers and members ensuring standards are achieved and maintained. This quarter has seen the delivery of "back to basics" training for our social work staff and further training will be rolled out in January. We are also looking to improve our recruitment and retention of social workers in order to deliver a consistently high standard of service and the initial response has been very positive.

Looking forward, we will be implementing our workforce strategy by March 2018 and the coming year will see a stabilised workforce with an emphasis on permanent posts working towards achieving a "good" children's service. As stated, this will report at a high level to the BVIB, but primarily through the above-mentioned accountabilities.

## **PROPERTY**

Regarding Community Buildings, a contentious past matter, we are making good progress with developing consistency in management and use of our large portfolio of buildings. The first having opened, our second and third 'community hubs' have been identified. Feasibility work has been undertaken on both and the detailed costings are currently being finalised on one with a view to it opening in April 2018 whilst pre-application advice is being sought on the other. A likely fourth hub has been identified and we are revising our timetable in order to enable negotiations to start with the current occupiers of the building. It is hoped that all four hubs will be up and running by early 2019. Meanwhile the management of virtually all community buildings is now in a good place, with a few 'trailing wires' continuing to be actively resolved.

More broadly, we are continuing to develop our asset management procedures focusing on delivering value for money management of our property portfolio and meeting the housing and community needs of the borough in a consistent and fair manner. Our capital delivery plans include community use, affordable homes and public realm improvement focussed on improving residents' quality of life.

## **GRANTS**

We are working closely with the local CVS to develop a Grants Policy to shape future delivery and all of our Community Cohesion contracts have now been mobilised and are delivering as planned. Standards and principles of co-delivery with the community have been reinforced by training and assisted by an independent review from the New Economics Foundation. We are aiming to extend successful contracts by 7 months thereby aligning their end dates with MSG grants enabling them to be considered as part of the future commissioning process.

Our Grants Scrutiny Sub-Committee has met 5 times this municipal year, considering a range of Grants Decision Reports and MSG monitoring reports. It meets 'in tandem' with a Cabinet Grants sub-committee. An in-depth review of grant spending on organisations that provide physical activities for young people is currently being planned. We are continuing to publicise the work of this committee through open meetings and use of the Council's website as we seek to engage local people so their views can inform our recommendations.

## **ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE**

We have revised and approved our Council Procedure Rules and Member/Officer Relations Protocol as well as our new Whistleblowing Framework. We are working hard to communicate these to ensure staff

and the public are assured of the transparency we are looking to achieve in all our dealings. I return to the behaviour of members below.

As regards improved management, we have a series of development and change strategies, partly determined by budget-led changes and partly by the need to improve the culture of governance, and professional support for and development of staff. Recently we commissioned a staff wellbeing survey amongst other initiatives to help us identify any issues that may be having an adverse impact on our workforce and their health. I recognise that our staff are the most important asset in the council, driving services and delivering high standards for all our customers so it is of vital importance that we look after them and enable them to work to the best of their ability, and that we support and develop our staff professionally, developing a culture of excellence.

We are currently looking at ways to improve customer experience and interaction, using technology and staff to enable our residents to access services more smoothly and flexibly whilst not losing focus on those who need or want more assistance and guidance. By enabling more confident residents, with more routine needs, to access services online we will both achieve greater efficiency and be able to deliver more targeted support where needed. This is an exciting and ambitious challenge for the council.

Returning to the matter of member conduct, this has been an underlying issue as you know, and is a part of our Organisational Cultural challenge. I believe that there has been substantial progress, with new standing orders and agreed codes. These have been properly embraced by a majority of our members.

Inevitably the coming elections will present challenges to conduct, with risks of past bad practice, as highlighted in the Election Court and elsewhere, being greater as electoral hunger rises. I am confident that within my administration there are good standards of behaviour and that our culture of transparency and accountability and of appropriately strengthened checks and balances will mean that such practices cannot occur under my mayoralty or indeed that of any Mayor following similar standards.

There are however two residual concerns which I or my Council cannot directly control and which may cause us renewed reputational uncertainty. The first concerns an allegation of attempted planning malpractice. The second concerns the continued failure of the Metropolitan Police to conclude investigations into matters raised at and around the Electoral Court, including those highlighted in its findings. For completeness I wanted to highlight these in my quarterly letter to you.

Regarding the first, you will have noted recent press coverage of allegations made in relation to an alleged attempt to subvert the planning process (the 'Alpha Square' application). My Council, in my view and that of my officers, carried out the right and proportionate actions in response to these allegations at the time they were made. As it stands, a report which was initially referred to the Serious Fraud Office has sat with the National Crime Agency since August 2016. While I am confident that the council took the right approach, and ensured that there was a full and independent investigation, I am disappointed that to date no response from the NCA has been forthcoming. I understand that my Chief Executive briefed your officials on the details we are able to share but we would be happy to provide a fuller confidential briefing should you wish.

Regarding the second, the continuing investigations into the alleged activities highlighted in the Election Court and other concurrent investigations remain under investigation by the Metropolitan Police, an investigation known as Operation Lynemouth.

With the elections approaching I believe public confidence would be well served by a resolution to both the Alpha Square matter, resting with the NCA, and Operation Lynemouth, resting with the Metropolitan Police, as quickly as possible.

To conclude, in summary, at our Best Value Improvement Board we have continued to review progress against agreed milestones of the Improvement Action Plan as well as looking in more depth at key areas through thematic Spotlight Reports. Over 80% of the activities on our Improvement Plan are reported as completed or on target but I am determined to maintain the momentum we have achieved to continue to drive all our services forward.

Yours sincerely



**John Biggs**  
**Executive Mayor of Tower Hamlets**