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Dear Secretary of State,

I am pleased to enclose the fourth update report on 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 19th March 2018.

This update forms a review of the past year of activity, progress and improvements in many key areas and, as always an opportunity to restate my commitment 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.

As we look at the progress we have made over the past year it is important to consider four key tests that we believe we are close to meeting and will do so by the summer:

1. Growing stability and elections with integrity

We are working hard to develop trust in all that we do through transparency, clear communications and ensuring that processes and systems are robust and fit for purpose. This has been a particular focus in preparations for the upcoming elections given the recent history in this area.

2. Continued improvement

Whilst the Best Value Improvement Plan has proved to be an excellent tool in driving improvement, we have been keen not to limit ourselves to delivering only the actions contained within this but have adopted a culture of continued improvement in to other identified key areas such as Children's Services, Adult Services and our customer focused culture. This has been evidenced this year through the spotlight updates at our Best Value Improvement Board meetings and quarterly reports.

3. Increasingly mature governance

Strong governance had been a key feature of driving improvement and culture change at Tower Hamlets. The sterling work and high profile of our Scrutiny Committee and reviews as well as our open approach to external challenges highlight this. We have also worked hard to strengthen our community

focused work with local partnerships and organisations and the development of community commissioning.

4. Effective plans for the future

Perhaps most importantly, we recognise that the improvements we are delivering now are not the end of the story but a platform for continual improvement. We have longer term plans in place for the future including budgeting, IT investment and the preparation of our new Town Hall. Following the elections in May we will also be producing new Community and Council Strategies reflecting our ongoing commitment to delivering the best for our borough.

BEST VALUE IMPROVEMENT PLAN PROGRESS UPDATE

The Best Value Improvement Board met in March 2018 focusing on progress in delivering the Best Value Improvement Plan. The board also received update reports on Grants, ICT Transformation Project, Children's Services and our plans for the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge.

A summary of the progress made implementing the actions from the Best Value Improvement Plan is outlined below, preceded by a summary of our progress with Children's Services. More detail on the BVIP is found at appendix one.

Our plans for the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge in June are moving forward with the dates and members of the Peer Team agreed. This independent review of our improvement journey and ongoing plans is an excellent opportunity for us to assess what we have achieved so far and how sustainable and appropriate our ongoing plans are.

I am also pleased to report that Tower Hamlets have just won two LGC Awards, one for our Carbon Fund project and the other a "Team of the Year" award for our Substance Misuse Service. This is a strong reflection of the positive work undertaken by our dedicated staff across the council which we also acknowledged through our own staff awards this month.

CHILDRENS SERVICES

I am particularly pleased to note that our work in Children's Services following last year's Ofsted inspection continues to improve with positive feedback from Ofsted and DfE regarding improvements implemented and sustained since the last monitoring visit in December. We continue to focus on driving performance in this area to protect our young people and offer positive outcomes in challenging circumstances.

Following the "Inadequate" grading from our Ofsted review last year, we have been working hard to deliver an ambitious Improvement Plan in this area. The extensive improvement programme is overseen by our internal processes, our independently chaired Improvement Board, our Improvement Partners and by continuing periodic Ofsted inspections. At a high level, this programme reports to my Best Value Improvement Board.

We put a lot of effort into improving the quality and reliability of data across all areas of the service to provide a more robust oversight as well as taking control of data quality going forward. This has led to greater confidence within the service that we are able to make informed policy decisions and deliver targeted actions. Our governance and performance management arrangements have also been improved along with delivery of essential training for our social work staff.

We have recently had a follow-up monitoring visit from Ofsted which noted the positive progress being made and made particular reference to the "relentless focus by senior leaders on ensuring compliance with statutory requirements" and that "improvements in the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) have been sustained since the last monitoring visit in August." A similarly positive visit from DfE has

reassured us that we are heading in the right direction but we remain fully aware that there is still a lot of work to do in order to meet our own ambitious targets for improving this area and achieving a "Good" rating.

One area that remains a focus for the coming year is recruitment and retention which is an issue facing many authorities in this area. We are developing our recruitment strategy, training and development offer and improving ICT systems to support the work of our staff more efficiently.

ELECTIONS

Over the course of 2017/18 our Chief Executive, who is also our Returning Officer, has been working with our officials to drive improvements in this area with a particular focus on preparations to deliver secure and successful local elections in May. The team has conducted a review of the UK Parliamentary Government Elections delivery and a new Electoral Services Manager joined us in January 2018 to lead on the improvement work and election planning and the team have worked very closely with the local police, Electoral Commission and other partners through regular planning meetings to agree increased security at all polling stations and the count venue. A suitable count venue, the Excel Centre, has been confirmed and a comprehensive count plan is being developed. I am also assured that extensive training for all staff involved on the day will be delivered along with refreshed guidance for staff and voters.

Conscious of having previously been identified as a high risk area in Eric Pickles' "Securing The Ballot" report, this month we welcomed the Minister for the Constitution, Chloe Smith along with representatives from Crimestoppers, the Electoral Commission and the Cabinet to launch the national "Your Vote Is Yours Alone" campaign to help people safely cast their vote without being influenced or pressured by others. The campaign will feature on our advertising sites around the borough, as well as our social media channels. We have some of the best measures to combat inappropriate behaviour during elections, many of which have been recommended nationally as good practice. These include exclusion zones around the entrance to polling stations, and police officers at every one of them. We also make checks on properties with over five registered electors in them, and we have introduced a new web tool where people can raise concerns about possible electoral fraud.

The register of electors was revised in December and our elections team are working closely with the Cabinet Office to deliver the pilot for the enhanced Postal Voting scheme to lead improvements in security and guidance. The pilot will include a dual-language leaflet on the electoral integrity and secrecy requirements. We will be conducting random samplings of postal packs dispatched and received with the results being sent to the Electoral Commission for analysis.

My Chief Executive's focus is on ensuring we have the resilience and systems in place to ensure the upcoming elections run as smoothly as possible and he is confident that this is the case.

COMMUNICATIONS

We have planned and delivered significant improvements to our internal and external communications over the past year including publishing a new Communications Strategy. My Communications Team have introduced new tools for keeping staff informed and engaged including dedicated poster sites and

information screens across council buildings, highlighting key events and activities. The new emailed staff newsletter has proved to be very successful with very high open rates and that continue to grow. By monitoring the most popular articles we are able to continue to tailor the content and design to engage staff effectively. We are also progressing improvements to our staff intranet with the

appointment of an Intranet Project Manager. We are looking to refresh the content and design to make information more easily accessible for all users.

External communications have also been an area of significant change and development. We conducted a Media Consumption Survey with local residents to identify how they access information and enable us to get key messages out more effectively. We have moved from producing a weekly printed newsletter to delivering more focussed communications and delivery of themed projects and campaigns such as "Breathe Clean" for improving air quality, "No Laughing Matter" tackling the use of Nitrous Oxide and "Operation Continuum" working with the police to disrupt drug dealing. Sign-up to our a-newsletters has increased with over 19,000 residents currently receiving our fortnightly general newsletter with more specialist areas such as Victoria Park, Sports and Physical Activity and Arts and Events all having strong subscriber lists. This demonstrates the public's desire to stay informed about issues and areas that affect them most.

PROPERTY

We have introduced a new governance structure to managing our property and deliver value for money across the portfolio whilst meeting the local housing and community needs using the Corporate Landlord model. In particular, we have made effective use of a number of vacant buildings for housing and commercial use.

In our improvement plan, we set ourselves some rather ambitious deadlines for identifying and delivering new Community Hubs. Whilst some actions in this area are showing as overdue, work is progressing well with the first already opened and the second due for completion shortly. Plans are in place for the delivery of all the remaining hubs by early 2019 and we will continue to monitor this going forward.

We are continuing to progress our review of depot provision in the borough with specialist consultant appointed to deliver a comprehensive feasibility study into this. Our capital delivery plans include community use, affordable homes and public realm improvement focussed on improving residents' quality of life.

GRANTS

We have been working hard in order to address concerns in the management and delivery of grants. We have conducted a comprehensive review of how we work closely with the local community and voluntary sector to deliver key actions and have designed and are implementing our new Third Sector Team. Our Grants Determination Committee and Grants Scrutiny Sub-Committee continue to meet regularly to monitor grant provision review spending and a full audit of grants was completed this year alongside an external evaluation of our Mainstream Grants which engaged a range of stakeholders. Work has progressed to adopt new grant management software enabling greater access to information and transparency of processes.

We have been working hard to facilitate the shift toward Community Commissioning and the delivery of Community Cohesion contracts which have all been mobilised and are delivering. We are also

continuing to work with the local community and voluntary sector to ensure they are able to engage effectively in this approach and offering advice and support as necessary.

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

This year saw the development of our new set of core values in consultation with our staff. The "TOWER" values of Together, Open, Willing, Excellent and Respect are being embedded in all we do and were used as the categories for staff and team awards at this year's Staff Conference. The conference was extremely well attended with over 800 members of staff there and was an excellent

opportunity to recap on the progress made over the past year and to reaffirm our commitment to improvement going forwards.

In 2017 we reorganised the top three tiers of our management team in order to better deliver our priorities and are continuing to deliver our transformation programme throughout the organisation focussed on meeting the needs of the borough efficiently and effectively. We are working closely with staff and the unions to manage the impact of these changes. In 2017 we conducted a staff survey which we plan to follow up next year to measure any changes in staff engagement levels. We also commissioned a Staff Wellbeing Survey to identify any areas of need or where support could be improved.

As well as establishing and delivering our Leadership Development Programme, we are also in the process of launching our new online learning platform for staff. This will enable us to deliver mandatory and discretionary training and development in an accessible manner that all staff can access and participate in.

This year we were reassessed for our Investors in People accreditation and I am proud to say that we have maintained our Silver level status despite the introduction of a more challenging framework. It was noted that our capacity to improve is stronger now than it was three years ago and we have clear recommendations to follow in order build on our success in this area.

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.

The Best Value Improvement Board continues to monitor progress of our Clear up project, looking at historic allegations of improper council decision making or wrongdoing. Progress in this area has been steady with the few remaining actions to be dealt with after the local elections are completed.

Improvements to our ICT structure are underway to not only improve the working environment for our staff but also accessibility to services for our residents. A large scale plan of improvements is in place to support different workstyles and provide a level of reliability and robustness to ensure sustained quality of service delivery. We have already introduced new Wi-Fi provision in our Town Hall and are looking to move to "cloud based" systems to support co-location and sustainability.

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. At the end of 2017/18, 79% of the activities on our Improvement Plan are reported as completed or on target but the Board is determined to maintain the momentum we

have achieved to continue to drive all our services forward. All outstanding and overdue actions will be carried forward into an action plan for 2018 and continue to be managed by the council and the Best Value Improvement Board.

My next update to you will be at the end of June where we will also be able to report the initial feedback from the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge.

Ahead of that however and as already noted, in May the council will hold elections for the Executive Mayor and councillors.

It is of course a key point in our journey, and a time when, whatever the outcome, the maturity of our democratic processes, which were found to have failed in 2014, will be tested. Whatever the outcomes, our progress so far has I think been significant and I want to thank you, your officials and the now departed Commissioners for the support and guidance they have offered my council. Compared to where we were three years ago the council is transformed and, I believe, heading in exactly the right direction, back to the mainstream and away from the division of the past.

I am clear however that there is still a lot more to be done to embed and complete that transformation. I also remain deeply concerned by the intransigence of some of the supporters of the previous Mayor who still refuse to accept any of what he did was wrong. I am however optimistic that while some may be unable to make this change, the larger part of our community has turned a corner, and will embrace a more open and outward looking culture.

Finally, I am aware that our last Best Value update prompted further interest regarding the allegations made about a planning application, as reported in the National Media. As requested my officers and I provided an in-depth account of what we understood to have happened and the actions we took. I remain of the view that the public interest would be best served by the police bringing this and the Operation Lynemouth enquiries to a swift conclusion with findings publicly shared and any people found to have broken the law facing justice, particularly in light of the upcoming election. I would urge you again to make representations to the police and home secretary in these terms.

Yours sincerely,



Mayor John Biggs
Executive Mayor of Tower Hamlets