



SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

Tower Hamlets is aiming high in its drive to forge a new future for local government





LUTFUR RAHMAN
Mayor of Tower Hamlets

Tower Hamlets is harnessing its assets to invest in communities and support local people

Over the past decade and beyond, austerity has led to the shrinking of local government at the expense of our residents and society.

I am proud that we have significantly increased investment in our services and provided more support for our community, while maintaining healthy financial reserves and ensuring balanced books.

By taxing wealth, cutting waste and duplication within the council, bringing services in-house and through rigorous financial planning and self-auditing to identify underspends and re-distribute, we are making every penny count and have made significant savings to invest in frontline services.

Public spending and fiscal responsibility are not mutually exclusive and Tower Hamlets is an example of how a local authority can control its assets directly and invest in its communities to improve our residents' lives and ensure that everyone has opportunities to succeed. By controlling our assets directly, there are many synergies we can take advantage of more easily – both across the council and with partners.

We are the first to provide universal free school meals to both primary and secondary school pupils. We are one of a few that offer university and college grants to our young people and a youth service in every ward and this year we are rolling out free school uniforms to children starting primary and secondary school.

We are supporting our most vulnerable with cost-of-living grants including plugging the winter fuel allowance gap and now we will be the only second local authority to provide free homecare.

We have brought the management of our leisure centres back in house, which has enabled us to upgrade them under our new Be Well brand and to offer targeted intervention such as free swimming to women and girls and men over 50.

Our waste service and management of our council homes are also back in house and we are investing in both. We are also in a better position to work across services so that we can meet the challenges such as collecting waste and improving recycling on inner-city estates and across Tower Hamlets where 80% of properties are flats.

We are investing in community safety including paying for more enforcement officers and police officers to walk the beat, while being guided by our state-of-the-art CCTV control centre. And we are attracting greater amounts of inward investment to create opportunities, particularly more affordable and social housing.

I'm writing this from MIPIM property conference, where we are discussing further housebuilding in the borough and we have been signing commercial deals such as the new Lido Festival in Victoria Park with promoters AEG.

We are pleased to be working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to pioneer a new form of government support for continuous improvement.

I want Tower Hamlets Council to not only lead our borough, but to support the local government sector as a whole. If you want to learn from our experience, please get in touch.

IMPROVEMENT PIONEERS

TOWER HAMLETS COUNCIL'S IMPROVEMENT JOURNEY AND COLLABORATION WITH GOVERNMENT COULD BE A STANDARD BEARER FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES



Receiving an 'outstanding' Ofsted rating for children's services in January marked another major improvement milestone in recent times.

For several years, the local authority faced a difficult road ahead. Accounts had not been signed off for seven years; it had struggled to publish an annual governance statement for several years; the senior leadership team was missing permanent appointments; and council structures and budgets could not deliver the ambitions of then newly-elected Mayor Lutfur Rahman.

Much has changed. All accounts are signed off and the council has established a three-year medium term financial strategy; the organisation has been restructured and a permanent leadership team is in place, and all historical annual governance statements have been published.

The council has brought in-house the management of its housing stock and leisure centres and Tower Hamlets is now the only place in the country to provide universal free school meals to primary and secondary schools along with bursaries for college and university.

'We have an incredible workforce in an iconic borough, but many of the pieces of the jigsaw were missing or in the wrong places when I arrived,' explains Steve Halsey, who joined the council as chief executive almost two years ago.

'The pace of change has been phenomenal. We have been able to show that with the right structures, budget and performance management framework, we can not only free up funds to deliver one of the most ambitious agendas in local government, but we can deliver it well.'

The approval of the authority's budget in February is a good example. The council has been able to continue its improvement journey and help residents with the increased cost of living.

This included free school uniform for primary and secondary school starters, free homecare, the return of a meals on wheels service and an energy fund to support people with bills including plugging the Winter Fuel Payment gap. Combined with the borough's innovative council tax reduction scheme and cost of living relief fund, the support is making a real difference for those in greatest need.

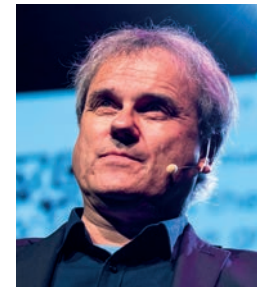
A NEW MODEL OF SUPPORT

Despite the successes, there is still a way to go on the improvement journey. In announcing a best value intervention for Tower Hamlets earlier this year, Government ministers have been clear about the change required. They have put a package in place which pioneers a new way of supporting local authorities,

and English devolution, visited the Whitechapel Town Hall in February to launch the support package. In a written statement to Parliament last month, he said: 'This support package acknowledges the political mandate the mayor holds, whilst recognising the need to tackle deeply rooted and persistent issues. It is designed to strengthen and expand the improvement work that the council has already begun and demonstrates how this Government is committed to resetting the relationship between local and central government through genuine collaboration and engagement.'

Mayor Rahman believes the council has 'the foundations to deliver one of the most ambitious agendas in local government in London's most dynamic borough'.

He adds: 'The collaboration between Tower Hamlets and the Government to pioneer a new model of support for local authorities and working together transparently on our improvement journey could set the standard for the sector. I am committed to providing Government with the assurance it needs and being transparent and



STEVE HALSEY
Chief executive, Tower Hamlets Council

Being realistic to the challenges

While Tower Hamlets is a place of opportunity, significant challenges including high levels of deprivation and overcrowding mean the council has its work cut out.

We need to ensure we are set up to meet these challenges. I and the council are determined to deliver the requirements in the ministerial directions and accelerate our improvement journey with a focus on governance, leadership and culture.

That will help us to run what is more like a city within a city with constant demands as the fastest growing and most populated place in England.

On average, there are a staggering 15,695 residents per sq km – 37 times greater than the national average. The 22.1% increase in population between 2011 and 2021 is combined with millions of visitors each year make issues such as community safety and cleanliness relentless.

The big squeeze brings other issues too. Almost half of children live in poverty; 15.8% of households are overcrowded and over 24,000 people are on the waiting list; the median weekly earnings is the second highest in the UK yet 40% of households have a total income of less than £30,000 a year. Therefore, we must be realistic about the major challenges we face.

We are a borough of contrasts. Canary Wharf and St Katherine's Dock are areas of extreme wealth, but many other places have significant levels of poverty for children and older people who are living in areas of high density. That causes serious pressure on our social infrastructure, be it housing, health centres or other support services.

Recycling and housing are good examples of the challenge. Tower Hamlets often has the lowest recycling rate in the country because 88% of properties are flats. That makes it difficult for both the residents to recycle, and a wrongly parked car can often mean a missed collection. When it comes to building, the only way is often up.

With the youngest population in London at just 30 years old, there are many new families that need more or larger housing. It's not just the number of homes, but also the quality. As a council, we accept the need to raise our game on housing following the introduction of new housing regulations. Earlier this year we self-referred ourselves to the Regulator of Social Housing.

We take our responsibilities very seriously and know our services are a lifeline for many and that we must make the most out of every penny. We are up for the challenge.



making good its promise to reset the relationship between local and central government.

Government envoys are supporting in three areas – culture and partnership, governance and leadership (a political mentoring programme) and culture change will underpin the council's continuous improvement programme.

The council is drawing on a stellar list of sector leaders to support this journey. They include the former chief executive of the Local Government Association and Brent Council, Caroyln Downes, as the governance lead; Jenny Rowlands, chief executive of Camden Council, as the culture and partnerships lead; and former executive mayor of Lewisham, Steve Bullock, as the leadership lead.

They will also sit alongside the envoys on the council's Transformation and Assurance Board, which is chaired by Mayor Rahman.

Jim McMahon, minister of state for local government

collaborative on our improvement journey.'

Steve says: 'We believe external challenge is essential to our success. Our Transformation and Assurance Board builds on 15 months of reviews including a peer review, an "outstanding" Ofsted rating for our children's services, an improved Investors in People rating and our best ever annual resident survey results.'

That survey has seen the council performing better than the local government average in almost every area. For example, 84% of residents say they are satisfied with the area, 66% trust the council, 65% feel informed and 90% of people say they get on well with one another – an impressive statistic given Tower Hamlets is the most densely populated place in the country.

'Tower Hamlets is a special place,' says Steve. 'A successful Tower Hamlets is important to a successful UK. We know the stakes are high and we are always ready for the challenge.'



SAFETY IN NUMBERS

BEING AT THE CENTRE OF A GLOBAL CITY MAKES COMMUNITY SAFETY A COMPLEX AFFAIR. THE COUNCIL HAS INVESTED IN A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH THAT'S NOW REACHED NEW LEVELS THANKS TO THE ANTI-CRIME TASKFORCE

This year Tower Hamlets is celebrating 15 years since the launch of its own dedicated teams of enforcement officers that patrol streets.

The THEOs, as they are known in the borough, work alongside the police and the council-funded CCTV control room to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour (ASB). There are currently 54 – increasing to 64 this year.

The council is also one of the few local authorities in London to fund police officers, 26 in fact, who work alongside the THEOs on issues prioritised by the council such as the safety of estates.

Together, they make a big impact. There have been 415 arrests by council-funded police officers since April 2022; and the THEOs have made 29,500 hours of patrols in 2024 and have issued 2,357 fines.

These extra measures and more are needed because of the borough's unique characteristics: the most densely populated place in the country; the third largest economic output in the country; with 300,000 people working in the borough; and having millions of visitors arriving each year.

'It is an incredibly busy place,' says Simon Baxter, corporate director for communities. 'People always come to the centre of cities to

visit or to earn money and we must manage that influx along with ensuring the safety of our residents and businesses.

'We work in close collaboration with the police every day, but given the cuts in recent years, we felt that we had to fund police officers ourselves to get more walking our streets and estates and to support our THEOs if police powers are needed.'

UNITED AGAINST CRIME

In February, the council launched its new Anti-Crime Taskforce, a collaborative enforcement model that has been set up to provide a greater visible enforcement presence around Tower Hamlets, tackle crime and ASB, and to provide increased reassurance to the public.

The council had already invested more than £4m in enforcement resources since 2022 and the taskforce will invest another £4m by 2026. It includes a new dog patrol service to join the THEOs on regular weapons and drugs sweeps in parks, open spaces and estates. Some £895,000 will be used to upgrade the council's CCTV control room, with state-of-the-art LED video wall display unit capable of monitoring 42 cameras simultaneously.



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SIMON BAXTER
Corporate director for communities

In recent years, all 350 street-based cameras have also been upgraded from analogue to digital. Although entirely funded and operated by the council, they are relied upon by the police and over the past two years, council CCTV operators have assisted with 581 arrests and helped to locate 41 missing people.



Simon says: 'Our CCTV network is fundamental to the police not just catching criminals but in providing evidence in court. What people don't realise is that the council funds and operates them entirely.'

'There are lots of opportunities. Now that we have taken management of our council homes back in house, we want to work with residents to position cameras at ASB hotspots. We are also going to be offering CCTV services commercially to housing providers.'

The collaborative approach to community safety has won the backing and support of partners in the police.

'I welcome the further support provided by the council to focus on crime and antisocial behaviour,' says detective chief superintendent James Conway, borough commander for Tower Hamlets.

'We and the council have our own unique sets of powers and responsibilities. It is by bringing these together, alongside our other partners and communities, that we will achieve sustained impact against crime and antisocial behaviour.'

HOMES FOR THE FUTURE

THE HOUSING CRISIS IS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE FACING LONDON TODAY AND TOWER HAMLETS IS LEADING THE PACK IN HOUSE BUILDING WHILE DEMONSTRATING THE DIFFERENCE A STRONG PARTNERSHIP APPROACH CAN MAKE

As the fastest growing and most densely populated place in the UK, housing is a huge issue for Tower Hamlets. More than 24,000 residents are on the council's housing register with many people living in overcrowded or unsuitable homes.

Tower Hamlets continues to have a strong track record of housing delivery in an increasingly challenging market. Its ambitious draft Local Plan is focused on going for growth. This financial year has been a record one for housing approvals. Up until February, the council had granted planning permission for more than 5,300 new homes.

The council's planning teams have been working with developers on creative solutions to unlock sites that have permission but have not yet been developed.

Several high-profile schemes are on site, including Poplar Riverside, Marian Place and Bow Common. Plus, the council is pushing forward with its council homes programme and is on track to meet a target of delivering 4,000 social rented homes by 2026.

Between April and December last year, 642 affordable homes were delivered with more completions expected in 2025. The council is also working on bringing another 40 sites to planning with the potential for up to 3,000 further affordable homes.

In addition, the council is working in partnership with Newham Council and the Greater London Authority to deliver 30,000 homes and new infrastructure in the Lower Lea Valley.



IMPROVING HOUSING STANDARDS

Tackling the housing crisis is also about improving the condition of existing homes.

The council is investing and improving its stock and currently has works on site worth £34m covering 4,692 homes. Extensive programmes worth £13.5m are underway to replace kitchens and bathrooms, test electrical equipment, fit new front doors and refurbish street properties.

With new housing regulations in place, the council, like other local authorities, must raise its game. It invited the Regulator of Social Housing to visit in February to assess what is needed and is expecting the results and grading in April.

David Joyce, corporate director of housing and regeneration, says: 'We took the decision to self-refer after a review of housing management services revealed some parts of the service were not up to standard. We are determined to make improvements and saw self-referral as a positive step to achieving this.'

'Our improvement plan is in place and is already delivering positive change, including a £140m investment for fire and building safety remedial works and clearing all outstanding fire risk assessments, but there is still more work to do.'

Tower Hamlets has some of the nation's most historic housing – none more so than the Boundary Estate in Bethnal Green, arguably the world's oldest council estate. Built in 1890, the grade II listed estate has a rich



DAVID JOYCE
Corporate director of housing and regeneration

DELIVERING A CLEANER AND GREENER BOROUGH



THE BOROUGH'S LARGEST EVER INVESTMENT IN WASTE SERVICES IS ALREADY HAVING AN IMPACT IN LONDON'S FAMOUS EAST END

As both the most densely populated and most visited place in the country, handling Tower Hamlets' waste and recycling is a serious challenge.

Streets and parks can get dirty very quickly despite multiple cleans every day, and with 88% of properties being flats, improving recycling

rates is a difficult proposition.

Tower Hamlets sourced its waste services in 2020 and the council initially struggled to address some challenges.

The quality of service suffered, leading to Mayor Lutfur Rahman calling a 'waste emergency' in 2022

and committing to funding significant changes.

Ashraf Ali, interim director for public realm, explains: 'The contract we had was covering up a lot of issues. Once we brought it in-house and started to understand the service better, we found more and more problems. It became clear that a root and branch approach was needed to change the service, from our strategic approach and structures of management, through to the frontline.'

'Now, the difference is night and day. We have the right structures, budget and staffing in place, and it is making a noticeable difference.'

The council invested an extra £5m a year into its waste service in 2024. That led to improvements including 72 new waste staff, 22 new cleansing vehicles and expanded street cleaning operations to



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history and is a popular location for film crews.

'The council is leading the charge on building a new generation of council homes, including in partnership with Countryside on the Harriott, Apsley and Pattison estate regeneration scheme in Whitechapel,' says Cllr Kabir Ahmed, cabinet member for regeneration, inclusive development and housebuilding (pictured above). 'It's also working with large registered providers such as Riverside to deliver regeneration and thousands of new homes in locations like the Isle of Dogs.'

LIFE-SAVING CAMPAIGN

As a built-up, inner-city borough with 80% of Tower Hamlets' residents living in flats, keeping people safe is a constant focus.

The rise in e-scooter and e-bike fires is a real danger for residents living in high rises. Overall, the borough saw a 43% increase in these fires from 2022 to 2023. By then, Tower Hamlets was averaging two e-battery fires a month. Often residents would not escape easily as the e-scooters or e-bikes were charged in stairwells or by front doors.

In response, the council launched a #ChargeSafe campaign with London Fire Brigade to give residents information on how to purchase safe accessories and charge safely. It also lobbied the Government for tighter regulation on the sale of battery parts and to provide outdoor charging spaces. Organisations such as Deliveroo have given their support.

The campaign, which includes an animation available on YouTube, has been offered through the Local Government Association for any local authority to use.

'These fires have become a significant issue across the country with some horrendous stories,' says David. 'The explosion caused by a battery is scary and within seconds there is a ferocious fire. We saw it as our duty to remove logos from our campaign materials and offer them for anyone to use.'

DELIVERING A CLEANER AND GREENER BOROUGH



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twice daily, seven days a week, on the borough's 115 busiest streets.

It has now triple-downed on that investment in the new council budget and an additional £15m over the next three years will be spent on improving the waste service further. The funding, which is part of the executive mayor's waste improvement plan, will tackle issues like fly-tipping, graffiti, street littering and weed control.

It also includes a proactive rapid response team to monitor and tackle waste issues in real time, utilising technology to modernise the service with optimised collection routes for greater efficiency and extended rounds, particularly in parks and high-footfall areas.

One of the keys to success has been the involvement of residents in tackling issues. The council's You Find It, We Fix It campaign encourages people to report dirty

streets, missed collections, graffiti and fly-tipping on an app, with a commitment to resolve the matter within 24 hours. It has also recruited 'street leaders' who can report issues in their neighbourhood and work with the council to organise clean-up days with residents. These are complemented by regular estate action days where the waste service visits different council estates for community clear ups.

'People are proud of where they live,' says Ashraf. 'We find with the right engagement and a commitment by the council to help, residents and businesses come out to make their area a better place.'

'At the same time, they know we will act against anyone dumping waste in their area. Fly-tipping alone costs the council around £2m per year – money that could be better spent on service delivery.'

Vital support in tough times



TOWER HAMLETS IS ONLY THE SECOND COUNCIL IN THE COUNTRY TO COMMIT TO FREE HOME CARE AS PART OF A WIDE-RANGING PACKAGE OF SUPPORT FOR VULNERABLE PEOPLE HIT BY THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS



GEORGIA CHIMBANI
Corporate director
for health, adults and
social care

While Tower Hamlets has pockets of extreme wealth, it also has significant deprivation. More than 50% of older people and children live in poverty.

When Mayor Lutfur Rahman was elected, eight council priorities were identified with the first being 'tackling the cost of living crisis'.

Since then the council has provided targeted support to low-income households with new measures announced every year in its budget. This has included a new meals on wheels service – which received £3m in the 2025-26 budget – free school uniforms and an energy fund to support people with their bills.

This is on top of other support which continues such as universal free school meals, free swimming for women and girls as well as men over 55, and stepping in to plug the gap left by the Government's change to the Winter Fuel Allowance.

The council has the sixth-lowest council tax rate in London, and one of the most generous local council tax reduction schemes, which will see the poorest households paying nothing at all. These measures and more have saved 28,000 of the poorest households from spending £34.5m of tax charges in the past year alone.

One of the eye-catching items in the latest budget is the commitment to introduce free home care. From 1 April, residents receiving adult social care at home will no longer be asked to pay.

The move to abolish the charges will make Tower Hamlets only the second local authority in the country to offer its residents free home care and will save each person receiving care, on average, £3,500 a year.

Georgia Chimbani, corporate director for health, adults and social care, says: 'Our focus is on improving the wellbeing of our residents and ensuring that the most vulnerable members of our community receive the support they need. They should not be put off getting help because they are worried about the financial cost.'

'We know the value of supporting people to stay healthy in their homes. Not only is it incredibly important to residents themselves and their families, but if we don't support them, the cost to the public purse – be it the council Government or NHS – will be far greater further down the line.'

'Addressing adult social care is one of the biggest challenges for this country, and we are playing our part in Tower Hamlets.'



SERVING UP 'THE BEST OF LONDON IN ONE BOROUGH'



Inward investment and income generation are becoming increasingly important to local authorities as they make their budgets stretch as far as possible.

Although Tower Hamlets is one of the most visited places in the country, there are always more opportunities to generate income for the borough.

The council is about to launch a Love Tower Hamlets campaign to celebrate the place and its people. The campaign will be rolled out with the council's partners with the aim of bringing people together and promoting the borough as a destination to visit and invest.

But Tower Hamlets has a head start on most parts of the country, says Andreas Christophorou, director of communications and marketing.



'For many places the first objective is to get visitors to come. Not for us. If you visit London you are likely to visit a destination in Tower Hamlets, be it the Tower of London, Young V&A or Columbia Road Flower Market. The trick is how we can get people to visit another destination in the borough afterwards.'

'The Love Tower Hamlets campaign will also be a tool to bring our communities together,

ALREADY HOME TO A HOST OF INTERNATIONALLY-RENOUNDED EVENTS AND DESTINATIONS, THE BOROUGH IS BUILDING ON ITS STRENGTHS – WELCOMING HIGH PROFILE FESTIVALS THIS SUMMER AND LAUNCHING A NEW 'LOVE TOWER HAMLETS' PLACE CAMPAIGN



to show the best of our people, and it is also a vehicle to promote our borough for investment.'

The council attended the Mipim property conference in Cannes during March as part of the Mayor of London's London Stand to do just that.

'HUB OF CREATIVITY'

This year, two major new events will set up in the borough. South by South West (SXSW) is a major conference and festival in Austin, Texas, that celebrates the convergence of tech, film, music, education and culture.

Shoreditch has been chosen as host city for Europe's first ever SXSW Festival because, as the organisers say: 'East London is Europe's hub of creativity and technology.'

Shortly after, Victoria Park will host the Lido Festival – a new four-day festival with acts including Massive Attack in what is boasting to be one of the greenest festivals ever.

It is being organised by promoters AEG, which already runs the successful six-day All Points East (APE) festival in Victoria Park in August, along with the In The Neighbourhood festival which uses the infrastructure from APE to put on a free event for the local community as part of a deal with the council.

Andreas says: 'Victoria Park is an iconic destination which is loved by residents and

visitors alike. For the 11th year running it has been voted in the top 10 parks in the country (unranked).

'Mayor Rahman set the council the target of bringing more income and our parks service has done a tremendous job in securing another major festival.'

They join a packed list of events starting with April's London Marathon which goes through Tower Hamlets for 9.5 miles – more than any other borough.

While people will know of iconic places like Wapping, Bethnal Green or Canary Wharf, many do not know they are in Tower Hamlets. That is part of the reason for the Love Tower Hamlets campaign, it's also why the council has developed a strong place narrative with the strapline 'best of London in one borough'.

Andreas said: 'The "best of" narrative runs through everything we do, from inductions and screen savers to staff passes and presentation templates.'

'Why is it the best of? Well, we have some of the best transport links with the highest number of tube stations, we are the fastest growing and most densely populated place in the country, we have destinations and venues that would be the envy of any world city, we are London's history and its future, and we have the third largest economic output in the country with Canary Wharf and an expanding city fringe.'



'Best of all we are one of the most diverse places in the world with a rich history of people from all backgrounds living together in harmony. If you want to experience London – its diversity, culture, history, incredible food, nightlife, skyscrapers or parks – it's all in Tower Hamlets.'



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ANDREAS CHRISTOPHOROU
Director of communications and marketing