

Tower Hamlets Community Engagement Strategy 2018-2021



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Foreword

The people of Tower Hamlets are our greatest asset. My main priorities are to make the council more transparent and accountable and to encourage more local people to get involved in shaping their neighbourhoods, council services and the future of the borough. This Community Engagement Strategy, and the Transparency Protocol I launched in December 2015, will help make sure that residents remain at the heart of everything we do. The strategy provides a framework for a new kind of relationship with local people.



John Biggs
Mayor of Tower Hamlets

It builds on how we currently involve our communities and outlines what we will do to improve the way we consult and involve local people over the next three years.

The current economic climate and continuous reductions in public sector spending by Central Government mean that we will need to make difficult decisions about our budget over the next few years. Therefore, it is more important than ever that we work together with the residents of Tower Hamlets to help us identify local priorities and develop solutions to the challenges we face.

I am grateful for all the input to this strategy that we have received from local people and stakeholders. I will be leading this council's approach to community involvement and look forward to meeting and working with even more local people over the coming years.

1. Overview and vision

The Community Engagement Strategy 2018-2021 aims to support strong, active and inclusive communities who can influence and shape the borough in which they live and work. The strategy aims to create a more transparent and accountable council and promote a vision where:

“Local people are effectively informed, engaged, involved and empowered by the council. They actively help define and design local priorities and policies, deliver and evaluate services and inform council decision making in areas that impact on their lives.”

Supported by the Tower Hamlets Partnership Community Plan 2015 and an overarching priority that aims to create an environment in which strong and confident communities can emerge, the new strategy also reflects the challenges we face in the coming years. This includes rapid population growth over the next decade, increased demands on services, high levels of deprivation and a continued decline in local government resources.

The strategy draws on good practices that we already follow and recognises the important role the community can play in:

- supporting us to work with them to measure our performance;
- how we respond to challenges;
- improving how we deliver local services; and
- providing residents with the skills and methods to make a significant difference to the way services are shaped and delivered.

To help us define our vision for involving the community, we have worked with a range of partners through working groups made up of representatives from all council directorates and social-housing providers and have consulted councillors, our main stakeholders (people with an interest in our work) and the wider community in Tower Hamlets. This has been supported by an independent study (see note 1 below) commissioned by us that involved local residents, council reference groups and housing partners. The study considered how effective our existing approach to community 'engagement' (involvement) is and identified where we could make improvements. (See page 3 for a definition of community engagement.)

To help turn our vision into a reality, we have drawn up the four priority outcomes below, with an 'enabling objective' that will help (enable) us to achieve these outcomes.

¹ The study was carried out by an independent research group commissioned by us to look in greater detail at the four priority areas of co-production of local services, community leadership, use of digital technology and how involvement could be made more effective. The study was made up of focus groups, interviews with stakeholders and residents, and a literature review.

Priority outcomes

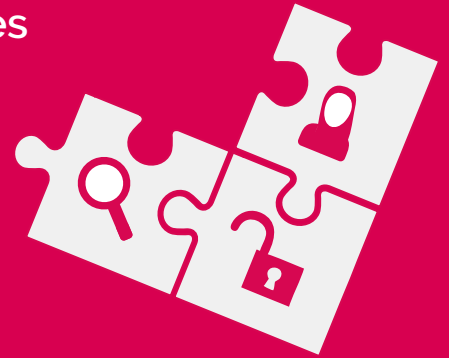
Outcome 1

Communities lead the way in making Tower Hamlets a great place to live



Outcome 2

Communities have the power to influence issues that affect them



Outcome 3

Activities to involve communities are focused and purposeful



Outcome 4

Tower Hamlets is digitally active



Enabling Objective

Staff are supported to involve communities effectively in everything that we do



2. National and local context

National drivers

The importance of effective community involvement is recognised nationally and supported by significant research. Under the public sector Equality Duty (created by the Equality Act 2010), councils must recognise the need to encourage people to take part in public life and other activities. 'The Benefits of Community Engagement' report by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) and the Home Office (see references on page 36) argues that government services in particular are often too remote and inflexible, and need to be brought closer to the people who use them (people living and working in the borough, businesses and other stakeholders).

Over the last two decades, there have been many drives to encourage greater community involvement, backed by the view that it supports better decision-making and builds trust. This view has been reinforced through the Local Government Act (1999) and the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act (2007) which place duties on local authorities to inform, consult or involve the public. The Localism Act (2011) introduced new rights and powers for communities, giving them the freedom to be better involved in the way local decisions are made and more influence over the future of where they live. These included providing communities with the right to take over and deliver local services, bid for assets of community value such as heritage sites and community spaces and approve or reject 'excessive' council tax rises.

Public-service providers nationally have used various approaches to involve their local communities (see reference 2). These have included citizens' panels and juries, neighbourhood committees and forums, community champions and joint approaches (used in initiatives such as the Healthy Communities Collaborative) (see note 2). The 'personalisation' of adult social care (where service users can choose and shape their care packages), driven by the Care Act (2014), has also resulted in more focus on connecting the development of public services with the real needs of the people who use them.

There are challenges for local authorities in involving people effectively, as set out in the Localism Act (2011) and other legislation behind the Localisation Agenda (an attempt to transfer more powers to local areas and communities). Barriers to successfully involving communities can include the established cultures of organisations in the public sector and the willingness and ability of service users and the public to get involved. In developing this strategy, we recognise that we will need to overcome these challenges and fully achieve our vision for the borough and its residents.

² The Healthy Communities Collaborative is a health promotion initiative led by the community. It works by involving the public as public health practitioners, training them to carry out basic improvements to their own neighbourhoods to achieve measurable and lasting change in specific areas of health.

Local challenges

Tower Hamlets has one of the fastest-growing populations in London and is expected to be one of the fastest growing local authority areas in England over the next 10 years. By 2026, the population in Tower Hamlets is predicted to increase by 26%, to 374,000 (see reference 3).

Each year the borough experiences high numbers of people moving into or out of the area. One of the main reasons for this is international migration. The 2011 Census shows that the number of residents in Tower Hamlets born outside of the UK rose from 35% to 43% between 2001 and 2011, making it the 16th most diverse local authority area in the country, with over 90 languages spoken in the borough. This growing and changing population puts particular pressure on local public services and infrastructure (schools, roads and so on), and can present major challenges to understanding communities and delivering services for communities that are constantly changing.

The public sector has also gone through a period of significant change in recent years. Cuts to Government funding for local authorities have meant we have had to deliver savings of over £138m from 2010-2016, with a further £58m reduction in spending by 2019-2020. With the referendum decision to leave the European Union, overall economic uncertainty will mean local government can expect to continue to see resources decline in the future.

Apart from the financial squeeze, there has also been major reform to the wider public sector, with particularly significant changes in both health and education. Alongside the introduction of the Tower Hamlets Clinical Commissioning Group (THCCG) and the many new free schools and academies, we have seen the growth of public sector 'place-based' partnership working, bringing organisations together to deliver services in a particular location.

Our challenges


By 2020




only 55% agree that the council involves them when making decisions



£58m reduction in spending by 2019-20




8-13% digitally excluded



13% rise in older people



11% more residents with a limiting health problem or disability



11% more children and young people



13% increase in population (to 331,010)

3. What is community engagement?

The term 'community engagement' can mean different things to different people and can cover a range of approaches depending on what people want it to achieve. It is best understood as a planned process, which has the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people, whether they are connected by place, interest, affiliation or identity, to encourage them to actively take part in making decisions about their community (see reference 4). This can range from encouraging communities to share their views on how their needs are best met and influence how services should be delivered, to giving communities the power to make and share decisions and provide services with us.



4. Defining our communities

Communities are usually defined as groups of people who have common characteristics. They can be broadly categorised as 'communities of place', defined by location (such as a hostel, a street, a ward, borough or region) or 'communities of interest', defined by any shared characteristic, such as ethnic group or race, age, occupation, a shared interest (such as using the same service), affinity (such as religion and faith) or other common bonds such as student or business communities (see reference 5).

Tower Hamlets is home to a wide range of communities, with more than two-thirds of its population belonging to minority ethnic groups, almost half of the population aged 20 to 39 (see reference 6), and a rapid population growth rate, which is set to outpace all other regions in England and Wales over the next decade.

There is a lively voluntary and community sector, including faith-based organisations, with over 1400 groups and organisations (see reference 7) providing valuable support and services to the residents of the borough. A large part of our voluntary and community sector is made up of small neighbourhood community organisations working locally to help in specific areas, such as employment support and youth activities.

In line with the aims set out in the Community Plan 2015, we recognise how important it is to involve communities, giving them the means to influence issues that affect them (this includes people working or studying in the borough). The borough hosts Queen Mary University of London, which attracts more than 21,000 students each year, 46% of whom come from outside the UK. The borough is also a base for a vibrant business community, which includes multinational corporations operating out of the Canary Wharf complex, serving the domestic and global financial markets, and over 16,000 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (see reference 8). As well as using the borough as a home for their operations, many local businesses, large and small, play an active part in supporting and strengthening our communities through initiatives such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes, sponsorship and funding, and volunteering.

We recognise that people are members of several different 'communities', and that some people find it harder to make themselves heard than others. This can be the case where individuals belong to marginalised groups or because they haven't been involved in a way that's properly inclusive. As a council, we want to make sure that we actively involve all of our communities in a purposeful way.

5. How we currently involve our communities

There are a number of ways in which we currently involve our communities.

Informing

We give people information about events, services, policies and decisions which might affect or interest them. We do this in various ways, including through our website, the 'Our East End' newsletter, fortnightly email bulletins, social media and printed information, for example, leaflets.



Consulting

We ask people for their opinions about policies and services.



Involving

We give people opportunities to influence and get involved with decision-making and commissioning services through forums such as the Youth Council and neighbourhood agreements.

Supporting

We provide support and funding to a range of local providers, including businesses and organisations from the voluntary and community sector in the borough.



Acting Together

We work with communities and the voluntary and community sector to identify what people's needs are, and take action to meet those needs.



Giving them power

We give communities the confidence and ability to build their skills to achieve outcomes themselves.



Our Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) also provides an important way of involving communities. It guides the way in which we involve residents, businesses and other stakeholders when developing our planning policies and making decisions about physical changes (such as housing and transport developments) to the borough. We are currently revising the SCI to reflect changes to planning law.

6. Priority outcomes

Outcome 1: Communities lead the way in making Tower Hamlets a great place to live

Overview

People and communities increasingly want a bigger say in the services they receive and in shaping the places where they live. Co-production as defined by the New Economics Foundation, offers an approach for sharing power 'in an equal and mutual relationship, bringing together professionals, service users, their families and neighbours to design and deliver public services' (see reference 9). This approach has increasingly been adopted by public sector organisations, who recognise that when power is shared, services are more responsive and any solutions reached better reflect the needs of communities.

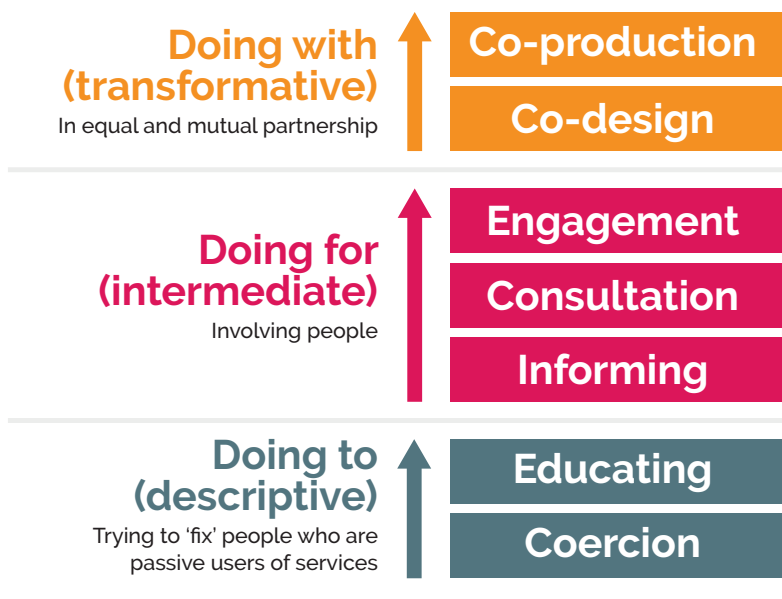


Co-production is best understood through the six principles that support it, as set out in the following table.

Taking an assets-based approach	Transforming the way people are perceived so that they are seen not as bystanders to programmes but as equal partners in designing and delivering them.
Building on people's existing capabilities	Altering the delivery model from one that focuses on needs and inequalities to one that provides opportunities to recognise and add to people's capabilities and actively supports them to put these capabilities to good use.
Reciprocity and mutuality	Offering people a range of opportunities and incentives to work with each other across sector boundaries, with mutual responsibilities and expectations.
Peer support networks	Using peer and personal networks as the best way of transferring knowledge, encouraging involvement and building expertise.
Breaking down barriers	Removing the distinctions between professionals and service users, and between those who provide services and those who use them, by restructuring the way programmes are developed and delivered.
Facilitating rather than delivering	Allowing professional organisations and institutions to trigger change (this will ultimately be led and shaped by others).

Together, these principles support a move away from simply involving, consulting and informing communities, to sharing power and recognising the power that communities have to transform themselves.

This process is best described by the 'Ladder of Participation' model (see below), which sets out the full range of how we can involve communities.



Source: New Economics Foundation (NEF)

To help develop our Community Engagement Strategy, we consulted residents and stakeholders on the strengths and weaknesses of how we currently involve them. They told us the following.

1. We don't involve residents enough or use their insight properly when assessing local needs and designing services.
2. We have limited options when designing services and these are often restricted by our structures and procedures instead of focusing on the outcomes residents want.
3. There is an imbalance in the relationship between our staff and residents, and we don't always value the views of local people (see reference 11).

Despite these views, over half of everybody we questioned agreed that getting involved in council consultations made a difference (see reference 12). To try to deal with the limitations raised by the consultation, we will work with others to help develop council plans and define how we commission services. This will help open up more of our work to our communities, allowing them to design and produce policies and services with us, particularly across adult social care, planning and regeneration, health and wellbeing, and youth services.

By adopting this approach, we aim to support our elected representatives to deliver their commitments through working more with residents, improved decision-making and stronger policy outcomes.

What we will do in future

We will work in partnership with local people, sharing power and giving them a greater role in designing and delivering local priorities, policies and services.

To achieve this we will focus on the following objectives and outcomes.

Objectives	Outcomes
1. Focus on working in partnership with local people, including hard-to-reach communities	Services are better at delivering improved outcomes and customer satisfaction
2. Develop council plans and commission services in a way that involves community assets and is driven by outcomes	Communities are recognised and valued as experts and put at the heart of deciding priorities and services

To achieve these objectives we will need to recognise existing barriers and promote ourselves as an organisation that is open to change and comfortable with well-managed risk. Our enabling objective (see page 32) will be at the centre of making sure that we have in place the necessary training and support for our staff so that we can deliver our priorities.

Objective 1

Focus on working in partnership with local people

To help us move towards a new approach to involve communities, share power and make involving communities and working more in partnership a priority, **we will put in place a co-production framework. This framework will guide how we develop all future council plans and commissioning, including strategies that are developed and delivered jointly with other statutory partners, such as the Health and Wellbeing Strategy.**

The framework (see reference 13) will set out the role of communities at each stage and act as a 'compact' (or agreement), managing the relationship between local residents and us.

Co-production framework

Stages	Plans and policies	Commissioning
1. Insight	We will involve and support communities by training them in how to identify local needs and priorities through peer research (see note 3) and participatory appraisal (see note 4). Information collected about local needs will be supported by evidence we and our partners have gathered, and used to develop a joint needs assessment.	
2. Planning	Communities, council staff and, where appropriate, service providers from agencies will come together to do the following.	
	Produce plans by developing a shared vision and making decisions about our main priorities and outcomes, and what will need to be done to achieve these outcomes.	Produce specifications for services, deciding on quality and outcomes, to make sure services properly meet the needs communities have identified. Communities and service users will also play a role in evaluating bids from suppliers and taking part in 'dialogue days' with potential bidders.
3. Delivery	Communities, service users and other relevant organisations such as Healthwatch will take the lead on assessing the effect of the outcomes and objectives, and recommend changes during the lifetime of the strategy or service. In the case of commissioning, what this stage can cover may be limited by the size of a service, how complicated it is and the number of commissioning partners involved.	

To make sure we make the most of all opportunities for co-production, our aim is that all council plans and commissioning will be co-produced, unless there are appropriate reasons for them not to be. We will support this by making changes to our procurement procedures (the process of buying goods, services and work), which will require everyone who is commissioning services to look for opportunities to use the principles of co-production at the earliest stages.

As a starting point, **we plan to pilot the framework by reviewing our Community Plan, agreeing a new set of outcomes and commissioning a range of cohesion services (see note 5) that bring people from different backgrounds together across the borough.** We will assess how effective this approach is and incorporate what we have learned into a 'community engagement toolkit' for staff, before including it in wider council practice.

³ Peer research is a research method which uses those taking part to lead on research activity.

⁴ Participatory appraisal aims to remove barriers to people's involvement in the community, such as barriers to literacy, power and confidence, through using practical and often visual activities such as diagrams and mapping information as part of the involvement exercise.

⁵ Community cohesion, as defined by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (CIC) 2007, "is about working towards a society in which there is a common vision and a sense of belonging by all communities".

As a public body, we will continue to be bound by, and are aware that we need to keep to, our obligations under various statutory duties. If we decide not to co-produce a service or strategy, we will be clear from the start about how far we will involve communities and manage expectations. We will make any information supporting our decisions available on our website. Reasons for not co-producing may include the following.

- Legal considerations and statutory duties have been placed on us.
- The service area involved is complicated and needs specialist knowledge.
- Protected characteristics groups may be affected (see note 6).
- Availability of resources (time, money and skills), the implications of this and the benefits that will be achieved by not co-producing.
- Who has the legal responsibility for taking decisions. For instance, in many areas of the council, our cabinet has the ultimate responsibility.

Each year, we will review our progress on our commitment to use co-production and present the review to our cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and publish it on our website. These reviews will report on our performance and recommend areas for improvement.

Objective 2

Develop council plans and commission services in a way that involves community assets and is driven by outcomes

To support communities and groups in playing a stronger role in shaping priorities and services, **we will identify and make best use of local assets**. This is one of the main principles of co-production and a fundamental part of strengthening and building involved and supported communities by focusing on their strengths, skills and resources to achieve better outcomes (see table below).

Needs-based approach	Asset-based approach
Focuses on weaknesses	Focuses on strengths
Results in disjointed responses to local needs	Builds relationships among people, groups and organisations
Makes people passive rather than active users of services and builds dependence on services	Identifies ways that people and organisations can contribute through their talents and resources
Gives residents little say in deciding how to deal with local concerns	Allows people to be a major part of the solution to community problems and issues

⁶ The Equalities Act 2010 defines the following as protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexuality.

Working with communities to gather information on community assets (things like skills, knowledge, ability, resources, experience or enthusiasm and physical spaces), we will aim to keep an up-to-date picture of our communities and assets, improve our understanding of local needs, and match assets to opportunities to design and deliver plans and services. As well as using people's skills and expertise, this approach helps people further develop their abilities by taking part.

To help establish this further and make sure we are clear about what is important, what needs to happen and who can best deliver this, **we will take an outcomes-based approach to developing council plans and commissioning services.** This change in approach, which focuses on defining and achieving end results as opposed to measuring outputs, will help to make sure we improve our activities and services. Putting this approach in place will require us to change working practices, particularly in the way we commission services.



Outcome 2: Communities have the power to influence issues that affect them

Overview

Councils need clear strategies and policies to allow them to deliver services that meet the needs of local communities while making the best use of resources. Agreeing these strategies and policies is the responsibility of our elected leaders and the democratic process.

Making sure that we can be held accountable for our decisions is important in strengthening people's trust in the way we make these decisions, and in encouraging more of the public to take part in influencing the decisions. To achieve this, we need to manage our decision-making processes effectively and be transparent in what we do, and make sure those who make our decisions are accessible.

As we enter a period of unprecedented challenges, it is essential that we govern openly and effectively if we are to show we are accountable and help communities to achieve better outcomes. To help encourage people to share our priorities and support communities to be involved, we are committed to giving people more opportunities to work with us to make decisions at a local level.



What we will do in future

We will be more transparent and give the public more opportunities to be involved in making decisions, to make us more accountable.

To deliver our vision, we will focus on delivering the following objectives and outcomes.

Objectives	Outcomes
1. Involve communities through elected representatives	Information and insight from local communities (community intelligence) is clearly reflected in the decisions we make
2. Improve transparency and accountability	Information is easily accessible to communities and open to scrutiny
3. Increase support for people to take part in community life	Local people influence issues that affect their communities and are involved in improving their local area

Objective 1

Involve communities through elected representatives

Our elected representatives have an important role in helping people to understand the democratic process (how we elect representatives and influence how the council makes decisions) and helping communities to make use of the opportunities available to them. We know that our communities are highly aware of their local councillors (see reference 14) but recognise that more can be done to make them more accessible.

In January 2016, we introduced our 'Ask the Mayor' events, where residents can meet the Mayor and councillors. These events, held every two months throughout the borough, have been well received, with many residents wanting to ask questions of their representatives.

Building on this success, **we will continue to hold and improve the 'Ask the Mayor' events** across the borough. Where appropriate, we will use them as an opportunity to bring together local partners, such as health and the police, to respond to local concerns. These events will also be used to share information relevant to the ward hosting the event, helping residents to better understand and influence priorities for their local areas.

While our main focus will always be on encouraging people to join us in person at events, we will explore widening the ways in which a range of people can take part in the 'Ask the Mayor' events. In line with our commitment to making Tower Hamlets more digitally active, we will broaden our use of social media, making use of opportunities such as live tweeting, sharing short online clips and exploring the potential of filming meetings and events. Short films and clips could also be used with the Mayor and members of our cabinet as a way of involving people in local priorities and issues. We will trial some of these digital techniques at particular events, with the aim of identifying methods that we can then use more widely across the council.

Objective 2

Improve transparency and accountability

Transparency is critical to building trust and gaining the confidence of the communities we serve. We have already adopted the Transparency Protocol and have agreed to put in place recommendations made by the Overview and Scrutiny Transparency Commission in November 2015, which aim to help us lead the way in openness, accountability and transparency by the end of 2017- 2018 (see note 7).

⁷ The Tower Hamlets Overview and Scrutiny Transparency Commission (OSTC) was established in 2015 to identify what we should do to improve transparency.

As part of our continued efforts to keep to the Transparency Protocol and put in place the Commission's recommendations, **we will update our website to publish information about our performance and include options for users to be alerted when we publish new content.** These changes will allow us to share information with users based on their preferences, and publish all the information required by the Local Government Transparency Code. This will include information about how services such as housing and community safety are performing, with options for people to compare our performance against local and national benchmarks.

To make us even more transparent, we will encourage residents to get involved when we make decisions, but also explain the limitations of this and redirect decisions to others where appropriate. **We will look at increasing the use of digital tools such as online petitions and social media to give people more opportunities to take part.** This might include live streaming through services such as YouTube and allowing questions via social media. As part of this process, we aim to gain the Social Media Friendly Mark developed by the Local Government Association, demonstrating our commitment to using social media.

Objective 3

Increase support for people to take part in community life

Communities feel they have more influence when their involvement has purpose and results in change. Local activity plays an important role in encouraging people to become more involved, and fostering the conditions that convince local people that making a difference is both possible and worthwhile. The Tower Hamlets Local Strategic Partnership and local engagement structures have been largely inactive for several years, and need to be renewed to help communities influence issues that affect them and encourage people to get more involved.

a. Renew the Local Strategic Partnership

The Tower Hamlets Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) forms part of our formal consultative and engagement framework set out in our constitution. It brings together statutory, private, and voluntary and community sectors to make sure that agencies in the borough work together to better meet local needs and priorities. The LSP defines our vision for Tower Hamlets and develops the Community Plan, which sets out our main targets for making the borough a desirable place to live, work and visit.

The Mayor will work with our partners to establish a new LSP, which will be supported by models of engagement that improve public services through involvement. The voluntary and community sector will also have a significant role to play. Our aim is that, eventually, residents will play a wider role in adding to social capital (see note 8) in the borough. The proposed structures for the new LSP include the following.

⁸ Social capital refers to networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, allowing that society to function effectively.

– Tower Hamlets Strategic Partnership Board

The Strategic Partnership Board governs the Local Strategic Partnership, and is responsible for making sure there is a borough-wide vision with a Community Plan that sets out our priorities and outcomes.

The board will be chaired by the Mayor, and will be made up of chief executive officers from the main statutory agencies in Tower Hamlets as well as leading figures from the private and voluntary and community sectors. Our aim is to make sure there are opportunities for a range of stakeholders to be involved and have a say in shaping and influencing the strategic direction (our long-term vision) for the borough.

The exact structure and membership of this board has yet to be decided, and will be decided by the partners themselves.

– Thematic partnership delivery groups

Thematic partnership delivery groups are responsible for delivering the outcomes of the Community Plan. There are currently many different partnership groups in the borough. Some examples include:

- Community Safety Partnership (Safe and Cohesive Community Plan Delivery Group);
- Health and Wellbeing Board;
- Children and Families Partnership;
- Tower Hamlets Housing Forum;
- Growth and Economic Development Partnership (in development); and
- Third Sector Advisory Board.

We plan to review all partnership groups to clarify their role and make sure they are effective and focused strongly on delivering outcomes and that their strategies and plans are in line with our Community Plan vision, priorities and outcomes.

Each group will have cabinet members in leadership roles and methods in place for involving communities, such as forums or feedback systems. We will also need to consider the role of the voluntary and community sector as part of the partnership groups.

– Public sector agency partnerships

To help make the improvements needed in the borough, we will consider holding regular meetings between smaller groups of chief executives responsible for statutory public services. We will host a partnership staff conference for senior managers from across the public sector and other key agencies, and propose that two major stakeholder events a year should be hosted about specific issues to bring together a range of external stakeholders.

– Local community engagement

Involving local communities can bridge the gap between services and communities and help make services more aware of the opinions and needs of the communities they represent. Together, services and communities can find solutions to local issues (see reference 15).

Public agencies often put in place structures and processes that stifle community development (the process of coming together to lead on collective action), preventing communities from changing the things that matter most to people, their families, neighbourhoods and wider communities. In Tower Hamlets, local involvement will be led by the community, with no restrictions on the numbers of groups or locations. Instead, we will allow and encourage communities to organise themselves in ways they decide and plan.

According to a report commissioned by Lambeth Council (see reference), this process usually begins with projects that are 'lean and live' – they start with very little money and grow rapidly through trial and error. These projects are developed by local people working together, and people can dip in and out of them without much commitment.

Online communities are also an important part of this and we recognise them as part of our commitment to support digitally active communities (Outcome 4).

Local involvement may include activities such as fundraising, organising community events and carrying out community projects. These will also give ward councillors an opportunity to be at the heart of their local community, playing a key role in supporting people to get involved.

We will work with socially active communities to encourage more residents to get involved and share knowledge and expertise across the borough. To make sure that those people or communities who find it harder to organise themselves are not left behind, we will look at working with the voluntary and community sector to help build people's skills in developing their communities. We will also make an active effort to involve communities who usually do not get involved, to make sure their views are also represented.

To bring about change, we need to identify the links between a community's involvement and their influence over decision-making, particularly relating to funding and resources. Communities will be involved as a result of the review of the thematic partnership delivery groups as set out above, and we are currently developing a local engagement model for the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) to allow a wide range of people to influence their local area. There is also an opportunity to use existing housing neighbourhoods or police ward areas to deliver activities, and opportunities for us and residents to produce local neighbourhood plans together. **We will review how we involve communities to influence funding and decision-making to bring about change.**

b. Improve business networks

Tower Hamlets is one of the highest economic and employment growth areas in the country. The borough is home to more than 16,000 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (see reference 17), as well as a number of multinational corporations, branches of national organisations and individual entrepreneurs.

We recognise the importance and contributions of our business community, and have worked hard to involve businesses through forums and workshops and supporting them to flourish in a challenging economic environment. We continue to try to develop a more business-friendly Tower Hamlets and explore how we can work with businesses to tackle the high levels of unemployment in the borough.

We also plan to establish a growth and economic development partnership. This partnership will be responsible for:

- promoting a lively local economy with high levels of growth which benefits local people and businesses;
- working with the voluntary sector to secure jobs for local residents; and
- making best use of stakeholders by co-ordinating action to promote a stronger local economy.



Outcome 3: Activities to involve communities are focused and purposeful

Overview

Public services must meet the needs of a diverse range of local communities and individuals. As part of this process, we need to involve communities through activities that support decision-making.

Poorly planned involvement can often lead to resentment due to failure to manage expectations. It can also often prove to be a burden as communities can be consulted more frequently without demonstrating how they are affecting outcomes by taking part.

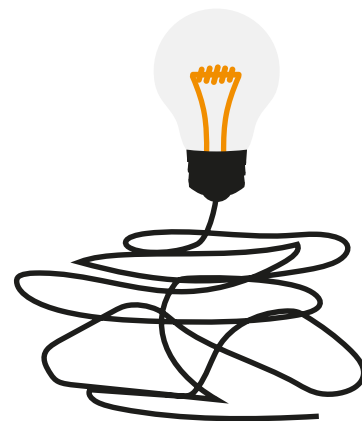
We recognise that our approach to involvement has not always lived up to the standards we hope to deliver. We need to do more to improve how we involve underrepresented groups, including young people, and Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) and disabled communities. A survey for the Overview and Scrutiny Transparency Commission (see reference 18) showed that just over two-thirds of people questioned felt that we do not listen to the concerns of local residents, and almost 75% of people thought we did not involve residents when making decisions or keep them informed about whether their involvement had made a difference. These views are not necessarily representative of the wider community, but they are a useful starting point in identifying a focused and purposeful approach to involving residents.

What we will do in future

We will create a simpler and more streamlined experience which encourages residents to take part, demonstrates how people's involvement informs decision-making, and supports communities to develop their ability to get people involved.

To achieve this, we will focus on delivering the following objectives and outcomes:

Objectives	Outcomes
1. Improve people's experience of involvement	Local people find it easy to be involved with us and feel that they make a difference
2. Promote opportunities for people to get involved	Local people are more aware of how and when to get involved



Objective 1

Improve people's experience of involvement

Success in involving communities can be judged by how many people take part in activities, the quality of their involvement (see below), and how effectively involving others encourages an organisation to share responsibility for challenges and solutions.

Our involvement with stakeholders in developing this strategy shows that we need to make sure the ways we involve people are clearer. We also need to improve people's awareness of how to get involved, share information, and highlight the effects that getting involved has.

a. Improve the quality of involvement

Effective involvement with stakeholders means making sure that the purpose and intended outcomes for each stakeholder relationship are clear from the start, and that stakeholders feel that they can affect the outcomes of a process in order to achieve lasting outcomes (see reference 19) .

Under the public sector Equality Duty any consultation we undertake must be meaningful. It states: "Sufficient time must be allowed for people to respond and responses must be considered with an open mind. Consultations should not be an exercise of form over substance."

To make sure we reflect this in how we involve communities, **we will do our best to make sure that all of our activity:**

- has a clear purpose and that we are honest about what the limitations are;
- involves people at the earliest opportunity to influence outcomes;
- gives people access to the right support to take part;
- is accessible and inclusive, considering the levels of involvement of each of the protected characteristics identified in the Equalities Act (2010) as well as other characteristics;
- allows people to easily see the effect their involvement has; and
- makes sure how and to what degree people are involved is in proportion to the size and resources of the service and the significance of the issue.

Where we can, we will establish this approach in services we commission, and promote them as a standard for our partners, in order to be more consistent across the borough.

b. Use more effective ways to involve people

Involving people in a focused and purposeful way also means going beyond our current traditional approaches and using more innovative and effective techniques to encourage people to be more creative and come up with fresh ideas.

To help us to do this, **we will use more innovative methods alongside our traditional approach.** This will include things such as World Café, Open Space, participatory appraisal (see note 3) and peer research, appreciative enquiry (see note 9), Forum Theatre, and asset mapping (recording a community's strengths and resources). We will also consider setting up a time-banking scheme (see note 10) to encourage people across the borough to get involved and place a value on their contribution.

c. Provide feedback on how involving people has affected outcomes

Providing feedback on how we have used people's contributions is important as it maintains people's interest. To make sure stakeholders stay involved and can continue to share responsibility for plans and services they have been involved in, **we will develop an online engagement tracker.** The tracker will aim to complete the feedback process by reporting on how opinions collected through previous involvement activities have influenced outcomes. The tracker will also support us to share more information with partner agencies and improve co-ordination in planning and delivering involvement activities.

The way we provide feedback will vary in line with the scale and type of involvement or activity and how practical it is to do so. If appropriate, we will give feedback in the way those taking part have said they would prefer. If we are unable to provide feedback, we will include a statement on our website explaining how we will use the information we have collected and where and when people can find it. If we decide to take a different approach to the feedback received from a consultation, we will clearly set out our reasons for this.

⁹ Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a model that aims to involve stakeholders in designing and delivering change.

¹⁰ Time-banking is a scheme that allows people to earn time credits for each hour given in helping others in their local community, working on a project or working for an organisation. In return for their help they can earn and use the time credits for rewards, either financial or non-financial such as free access to leisure facilities..

Objective 2

Promote opportunities for people to get involved

Councils are bound by a 'duty' to inform, consult or involve. As part of this, we involve residents and stakeholders in processes such as consultations to help us decide on our priorities for the borough and provide services that meet local needs.

We recognise that we have to make improvements so that more of the community are getting involved and taking part. To do this efficiently, the process has to be accessible and inclusive and keep to the Equalities Act (2010), in particular the technical guidance on the public sector Equality Duty and the duty to promote community cohesion (see note 5).

The public sector Equality Duty also says that before deciding whether further involvement is necessary and the extent of that involvement, we should establish what information is already available, such as research or the results of earlier consultation and involvement activities, and where the gaps are. We should also work with other organisations on any involvement exercises to make best use of resources and to reduce 'consultation fatigue'. Improving how we co-ordinate our involvement activities will improve our ability to do this.

a. Promote opportunities for involvement

To increase awareness of opportunities for involvement and make it easier for people to find information about activities, **we will develop a consultation and involvement calendar**. This will act as a central database, setting out details and timeframes of taking part in all our consultation and involvement activities. It will also help residents and our partners to identify areas of interest and provide their contributions.

To reach the small minority of the borough that is not digitally active, we will look at including information about involvement in existing hard copy publications, such as annual council tax statements.

We will also work with ward councillors to encourage more people to get involved locally and have their say. They will lead the way in highlighting the opportunities there are for residents to get involved and help them to understand local democracy and other processes. We will provide support and training for our councillors and highlight how they could use their role to encourage people to get involved.

We will work in partnership with the Tower Hamlets Youth Council, schools and the wider voluntary and community sector to promote opportunities for involvement, including actively taking part in improving local areas. We will also work with our Youth Service to make sure that when consulting and involving residents we specifically consider young people when designing, planning and putting in place activities. We also plan to use the expertise of Tower Hamlets Youth Council and other youth forums when developing activities that are relevant to young people.

b. Establish permanent spaces for involvement

To continue to make it easier for people to find out about opportunities to get involved, **we will create permanent 'engagement spaces'**. These will be guidance and information points inside Idea Stores, as part of the 'local presence' model. We will maintain a digital and physical presence on the council website and across a small number of key Idea Stores in the borough. The spaces will provide:

- information on consultation, involvement and decision-making activities, with links to the consultation and engagement calendar, council committee pages and information on how to get involved;
- a live feed of the council's social media pages;
- information about the Local Strategic Partnership, including information about thematic groups and community-led activities;
- feedback from previous activities and information on action we have taken;
- key information about local forums and groups, for example key contacts and frequency of meetings;
- information about community leadership positions such as school governors and trustees;
- information on community events and activities we run or support, including arts, culture and sports activities; and
- guidance on volunteering or setting up a community group.

c. Create recognisable campaigns

To make people more aware of the opportunities there are to get involved in the community, **we will make sure all of our activity is supported with recognisable campaigns**. This will help to symbolise the new partnership we want to form with the wider community. Evidence from other boroughs such as Camden and Islington (the Vision Islington campaign) show how successful this can be in encouraging councils and communities to work together on their priorities.



Outcome 4: Tower Hamlets is digitally active

Overview

Technology has always played a vital role in the way local government works. Over the last decade, things like smart phones and tablets, and access to reliable broadband connections, have become essentials of modern living.

Social changes driven by advances in technology, together with fewer resources, mean councils need to adapt and look for innovative and efficient ways of involving communities and providing important services. This need is also reflected nationally through the Government's 'Digital by Default' programme, which aims to make it easier for residents to access digital services (and as a result improve efficiency). Feedback from our residents confirms that they too expect Tower Hamlets to be at the forefront of innovation in the use of technology (see reference 20).



The number of people in Tower Hamlets who have access to the internet is high and closely resembles London averages. Figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and our own Annual Residents Survey 2016 suggest 87 to 92% of adults in Tower Hamlets have access to the internet. We know that, on average, younger people use more platforms to access online services, with the average being 2.3 platforms for 18- to 34-year-olds, compared with 1.7 for those aged 50 and over. However, findings from the Annual Residents' Survey 2014 (see reference 21) tell us that residents with disabilities or health problems are far less likely to have access to the internet, and those from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds are less likely to use online methods to contact us than people from white British backgrounds.

While we want to try to increase our digital presence, we also need to consider those who are less able to get involved in this way, and make sure that everyone in Tower Hamlets is supported to access the necessary technology.

What we will do in future

We will increase our digital presence and offer communities new, improved and accessible ways to contact us.

To do this, we will focus on achieving the following objectives and outcomes.

Objectives	Outcomes
1. Increase the use of digital technology to connect with people in the borough	Local people are able to contact us through a range of digital methods that meet their needs
2. Promote ways that people can get involved via digital technology	Local people are aware of digital services and supported to use them

Objective 1

Increase the use of digital technology to connect with people in the borough

Increasing the use of digital technology can help us to involve larger groups of people, help us to better plan, manage and direct resources more effectively, and shape policy. As well as being a responsive platform, using technology effectively can help us make savings and improve residents' satisfaction with services.

a. Strengthen our digital communications

Since 2004, the popularity of social media services has grown rapidly. Organisations across the private and public sectors have been quick to recognise the potential of this, and today all but a few major brands or public sector bodies use services such as Twitter or Facebook alongside their usual communication methods. Our own Twitter page, @TowerHamletsNow, set up in 2010, currently has more than 12,500 followers, offering us a significant opportunity to connect with a large audience. As an example, our use of social media as part of a campaign to refresh the Local Plan was seen by approximately 60,000 people.

Building on our existing social media presence, **we will support key council services to involve the community through social media.** Working closely with services such as Community Safety or Public Health and using our Communications Service to advise and guide staff will mean we can offer new ways to involve and interact with the public, such as using photos, videos and text, alongside our existing methods of communication. We will also use social media more extensively to ask for feedback on services and promote opportunities for people to get involved more widely.

We will support these changes with **a smart e-newsletter system that will give people information about our services based on their preferences.** This will help to increase the number of people we can involve by providing more relevant and tailored information, and will target specific campaigns to specific audiences, for example childcare campaigns and parents.

b. Develop a 'My Tower Hamlets' hub

Our Annual Residents Survey 2014 (see reference 22) showed that while 59% of our residents used internet banking, only 37% used our online system to pay their council tax. We recognise that we need to improve our website facilities to provide a simpler and more user-friendly way for residents to access services.

To encourage more people to use our online and digital services, **we will co-produce an online 'My Tower Hamlets' hub which provides personalised access to our main services and key information.** Working with residents and local businesses, the portal will provide a central hub that works across desktops, tablets and mobiles and can interact with a range of services. These services may include managing council tax, parking permits, planning and licensing applications, refuse collection, complaints, and freedom of information requests. Users would also be able to receive emails and text messages about opportunities to get involved or decisions being taken at council committees. This will allow us to provide everybody with the same consistent service, reduce the number of separate online services and encourage greater interaction between us and the people who use our services. Residents would also be able to access the hub at Idea Stores through self-service facilities.

c. Use innovative digital engagement tools

Involving people through traditional digital methods can sometimes fail to raise enough interest and enthusiasm for involvement. We have been at the forefront of exploring new ways of using technology to involve people efficiently and effectively.

To make sure we continue to be innovative, **we will promote new digital services to help us reach more people and support initiatives led by us and the community.** Using gamification (see note 11), for example, will help us to encourage groups who may be harder to involve, while platforms such as Spacehive (an online crowdfunding programme) will allow us to involve and support communities to strengthen, find more effective solutions to problems and put their ideas into practice and get results. Spacehive is increasingly being used by local authorities and is supported by the Mayor of London, who pledged £840,000 to projects across London between June and September 2016.

To encourage people to use these services, we will promote them through our website, intranet and social media.

¹¹ Gamification' is applying game-playing elements (for example, point scoring, competition with others) to other areas of activity to encourage people to use a product or service.

Objective 2

Promote ways that people can get involved with digital technology

While we welcome these digital opportunities, we realise that as technology changes there are likely to be differences in how different groups are able to access these opportunities. Information from the 2013 ONS Opinions and Lifestyle Survey suggests that, nationally, up to 45% of people do not use digital technology due to a lack of skills or because they cannot afford the cost of equipment or access to equipment. Although we do not have detailed information on this, we know that 8 to 13% of adults in the borough do not have access to the internet (see reference 23) and Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups and residents with disabilities are less likely to use online methods to contact us. The public sector Equality Duty states that, if further evidence of the involvement of different protected characteristics groups is needed, we must collect it.

In line with our Digital Inclusion Strategy, **we will provide a range of initiatives to develop confidence and life skills among our vulnerable groups in using digital services.** To do this, we will work closely with volunteers, community groups, providers of services we have commissioned and local businesses through social responsibility programmes, such as Barclays Digital Eagles, by using 'digital champions', and recruiting volunteers to help others gain digital skills. We will also work with ICT providers to look at increasing people's access to the internet and digital technology, particularly vulnerable people and other priority groups. As well as looking at improving the availability of Wi-Fi in the borough, we will continue to make computers with free internet access available in council buildings, particularly Idea Stores.

idea



Enabling objective

Staff are supported to involve communities effectively in everything that we do

Overview

Involving communities can often be affected by assumptions, for example about a community's needs, strengths and differences. This is often the result of not knowing enough about the community, relying too much on established methods of involving people or unrepresentative individuals (such as self-appointed community leaders). Failing to involve the whole of a community can result in continuing to misunderstand the needs of various groups, and this has been highlighted as a weakness in how we involve people.



Our vision commits us to informing and involving all local people effectively, helping them to influence the issues that affect their lives. The success of this vision depends on our staff, who will be at the centre of driving forward our commitments. Like our communities, staff will also need to be able to challenge historical patterns and conventions and establish new standards and approaches. This includes being able to identify when and how to involve people, planning involvement effectively and having access to the right tools, skills, knowledge and information.

What we will do in future

We will support our staff through giving them access to training, advice, guidance and information to help them design and deliver activities which are effective, focused, purposeful and inclusive.

Objectives	Outcomes
1. Introduce tools and frameworks to help staff develop effective ways of involving communities	Staff have access to the tools and support they need to design and deliver involvement which is effective and inclusive
2. Provide training to support skills and build ability	Staff have the skills and confidence to involve communities and understand their needs

Objective 1

Introduce tools and frameworks to help staff involve communities effectively

While it is important that we provide more opportunities for communities to get involved, we must make sure that staff have access to the right tools and support to do this properly and consistently, make sure that they overcome 'consultation fatigue' by avoiding repeating activities, and improve value for money.

Toolkits have grown in popularity for their ability to provide simple and effective guidance on 'how to' do something. Used widely by other local authorities, they offer advice and guidance on methods of involving residents, as well as guidance on how to evaluate the success of involvement activity. Well-designed toolkits have been shown to help councils involve a more diverse range of people, as noted by the London Borough of Lambeth.

Recognising the benefits of this approach, **we will develop a community engagement toolkit to support staff to plan and deliver community involvement.** The toolkit will also be designed to be used by the community themselves.

Our toolkit will be supported by the following principles to help us make sure all future opportunities for involvement are:

Timely	Community-focused	Inclusive
Interactive	Effective	Relevant
Well publicised	Well organised	Open, fair and can be evaluated
Cost-effective	Flexible	Accountable and provides feedback on results

As well as providing advice and guidance on a range of ways to consult and involve people, the toolkit will also include information on how to design inclusive activities, particularly relating to protected characteristics groups set out in the Equality Act 2010 and the technical guidance on the public sector Equality Duty. This will include case studies and user guides, checklists and self-assessment frameworks, as well as links to internal and external sources, which provide information on our communities and assets.

To help us improve how we co-ordinate involvement activity within the council and with local partners such as the Tower Hamlets Clinical Commissioning Group, the toolkit will also include guidance that makes sure staff consider working with partners before choosing to deliver a separate programme. This will be supported by professional networks and online resources to help groups share information.

By making key information on community and voluntary groups and local assets (for example, size, skills and interests, and range of activity) easily and freely available, we can support our partners to recognise the skills and interests of communities and groups in the borough, and widen the opportunities available to community groups to improve the borough.

We recognise that the community itself knows best what works in terms of getting involved, so we will consult local people and keep them involved as we develop various aspects of the toolkit.

Objective 2

Provide training to support skills and build ability

Delivering this strategy requires us to make sure that staff have the necessary skills to design effective involvement programmes which use new approaches. This will be critical to making sure we are able to achieve our vision and deliver worthwhile involvement.

To make sure staff are appropriately supported, **we will include training on community involvement for services across the council to take up.** This will include formal training sessions, seminars and workshops, and more informal techniques reflecting the needs of staff and services. It will cover areas such as putting in place the principles of co-production when developing plans and commissioning services, using plain English, improving accessibility and inclusion, and improving digital skills. This will be crucial to making sure staff and services are able to use tools such as social media to support our new approach to involvement. We will provide training each year, to make sure any new staff are covered.

We will also encourage networking opportunities within the council and with local partners who are involved in community involvement, or who are using particular techniques such as co-produced commissioning, to provide peer support and review and share learning and resources.

We will also provide a single point of contact for staff to get guidance and resources on community involvement.

7. Conclusion

This Community Engagement Strategy reflects the input of local people and stakeholders. It is about using the valuable skills and expertise of local people to work together, and changing our relationship with local people to one of partnership.

The strategy, through its four key priority outcomes and enabling objective, outlines what will help us to achieve our vision. The priority sections outline the outcomes and objectives against which actions have been set out in the delivery plan. We will develop these actions by working with others using the approach set out in this strategy. Because delivering this strategy demands that we completely change the way we involve the local community, we will take particular care to make sure that our delivery plan is supported with the necessary resources and owned by those responsible for delivering it.

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