

Tower Hamlets Compact 2025-29

1. Introduction

This Compact is an agreement between Tower Hamlets Council and the local voluntary and community sector.

This Compact sets out how the voluntary and community sector and Council will work together to achieve common goals and deliver better outcomes for the communities of Tower Hamlets. It is based on the principle that a strong, diverse, and independent voluntary and community sector is essential for helping communities to thrive. It aims to promote effective collaboration, mutual respect, and shared responsibility.

We use the terms 'voluntary and community sector' and 'voluntary organisations' in this Compact. For us, this includes registered charities, social enterprises, community groups, faith groups, tenants' and residents' associations, co-operatives and community interest companies.

The Compact is a key aspect of the Council's commitment to the voluntary and community sector (VCS). As stated in the Council's *Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy 2025-29*, the Council's vision is:

... to work in partnership with the VCS and other stakeholders to foster a thriving, inclusive, and sustainable sector that continues to improve residents' lives.

Together, we will focus on:

- 1. Building strong, trust-based relationships between the VCS and the Council*
- 2. Collaborating across the VCS, Council, and partners to effectively meet community needs*
- 3. Strengthening the capacity, resilience, and voice of the VCS*
- 4. Supporting the VCS to grow its independence and long-term sustainability.*

This Compact upholds the aspirations and principles contained in the [Civil Society Covenant](#). It is intended that a future version of the Compact will include other public sector partners.

2. Compact principles

The Tower Hamlets Compact has been developed jointly by the Council and voluntary and community sector partners, and is underpinned by a set of shared principles:

1. Everything we do as partners is to improve the lives of the people and communities of Tower Hamlets.
2. We recognise that the voluntary and community sector and volunteering make a valuable contribution to the economic, environmental and social development of Tower Hamlets.
3. We share a commitment to maintaining and developing a thriving voluntary and community sector in Tower Hamlets that
 - a. celebrates the rich diversity of Tower Hamlets
 - b. gives voice and access to all

- c. removes barriers and actively tackles all forms of discrimination.¹
- 4. We value the voluntary and community sector's independence.
- 5. We value the role of both sectors in holding the other to account in a constructive and respectful way.
- 6. We recognise the constraints that each sector faces (most notably financial and capacity constraints).
- 7. We will work together in a way that fosters genuine building of trust and effective working relationships.
- 8. We will make decisions together and collaborate at the earliest stage possible in tackling the borough's needs and problems, and aim to conduct our business with the other sector in a timely manner.
- 9. We will use this Compact to highlight and celebrate good working practices and to help improve working practices.
- 10. We will learn and change when things go wrong.

3. Compact commitments

The Council and voluntary and community sector make the following commitments which we hope will lead to:

- 1. a strong, diverse and independent voluntary and community sector
- 2. effective and transparent design and development of policies, programmes and public services
- 3. responsive and high-quality programmes and services
- 4. clear arrangements for managing changes to programmes and services
- 5. a more equal and fairer society.

Outcome 1: A strong, diverse and independent voluntary and community sector

Joint commitments

- 1.1 Uphold the independence and diversity of the sector.
- 1.2 Recognise and support the needs of smaller and diverse organisations.
- 1.3 Take steps to understand how the other sector works and the constraints colleagues from the other sector face and work together to overcome challenges.

¹ We specifically see this Compact in enabling us to work together to address discrimination according to the nine characteristics protected in the Equalities Act 2010, plus inequality caused by income. The nine protected characteristics according to the law are age, disability, gender identity, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

- 1.4 Jointly develop a volunteering strategy for Tower Hamlets in partnership with public sector bodies.
- 1.5 Recognise volunteering as valuable to individuals and communities and that it adds considerable value to public services.
- 1.6 Increase awareness, accessibility, quality and inclusivity of volunteering, especially for people facing barriers.
- 1.7 Promote and support high-quality volunteer management and development.
- 1.8 Encourage inclusive and accessible volunteering opportunities for all communities.
- 1.9 Ensure diverse participation in jointly convened partnerships, forums and advisory groups. Ensure representatives have a mandate to represent, and the knowledge to be able to represent sector views and needs, not just their own organisation's interests.

Council commitments

- 1.10 Actively support the voluntary and community sector's ability to operate independently.
- 1.11 Enable the voluntary and community sector to campaign, to speak freely, and constructively comment on policies that affect the communities they serve, without fear of reprisal.
- 1.12 Recognise the vast additional resources that the voluntary and community sector brings into Tower Hamlets, financially and through volunteer time.
- 1.13 Support leadership development within the voluntary and community sector, and the community; strengthen the sector's influence, collective voice and advocacy.
- 1.14 Invest in infrastructure that supports an effective voluntary and community sector and impactful and diverse volunteering; recognise that the voluntary and community sector plays an essential role in developing and delivering this in partnership with the Council, as well as in providing an independent voice for the sector.
- 1.15 Work with the voluntary and community sector in a coordinated and consistent way across council departments.
- 1.16 Accept and examine different forms of evidence from the voluntary and community sector that includes quantitative, qualitative and participatory methods.

Voluntary and community sector commitments

- 1.17 Represent the views of service users and beneficiaries objectively in decision-making processes.
- 1.18 Seek the views of service users, members, volunteers and trustees as appropriate when making representation to the public sector; do so respectfully and ensure that principles promoting equality and diversity are fully taken into account. Be clear on who is being represented, in what capacity, and on what basis that representation is being made.
- 1.19 Promote and respond to public sector consultations where appropriate.
- 1.20 Participate in partnerships, forums and advisory groups, when capacity allows.
- 1.21 When putting forward ideas, focus on evidence-based solutions and positive outcomes. Provide constructive challenge to improve policy and service delivery.

- 1.22 Develop policies and training to support volunteer recruitment and retention, including appropriate vetting, training on safeguarding issues and reimbursement of volunteer expenses, where possible.
- 1.23 Promote diversity in volunteering and remove or minimise barriers to participation.

Outcome 2: Effective and transparent design and development of policies, programmes and public services

Joint commitments

- 2.1 Work together towards best practice in community involvement and engagement, with agreed standards and adequate timelines.
- 2.2 Foster best practice in community engagement as set out in the Council's Community Engagement Strategy 2024-28.
- 2.3 Ensure all potential sources of funding (public sector, private sector, earned income, and so on) are maximised.
- 2.4 Explore the potential to pilot new joint initiatives, particularly in response to unmet need.

Council commitments

- 2.5 Consider the social impact that may result from policy and programme development and implementation.
- 2.6 Work with the voluntary and community sector from the earliest possible stage to co-design policies, programmes and services; recognise sector expertise and encourage contributions from VCS organisations representing and supporting all communities, including those with specialist relevant expertise.
- 2.7 Work with the sector proactively to ensure community consultation is excellent and coordinated, avoiding unnecessary or duplicative consultation.
- 2.8 Give early notice of forthcoming consultations, allowing time for voluntary and community sector organisations to involve their service users, members, volunteers and trustees.
- 2.9 Provide feedback wherever possible to explain how respondents have influenced the design and development of policies, programmes and public services, including where respondents' views have not been acted upon, and the reasons why.
- 2.10 Assess the implications for the sector of new policies and guidance, aiming to reduce the bureaucratic burden, particularly on small organisations, especially with respect to reporting requirements.
- 2.11 Ensure communication is accessible, use clear language, avoid jargon, use networks to ensure that communications get to where they need to reach.

Voluntary and community sector commitments

- 2.12 Promote and respond to public sector consultations where appropriate.

- 2.13 When putting forward ideas for service design, focus on evidence-based solutions, with clear proposals for positive outcomes.

Outcome 3: Responsive and high-quality programmes and services

Joint commitments

- 3.1 Work together to demonstrate the social, environmental, and economic value of services that the Council funds voluntary organisations to deliver.
- 3.2 Work together to facilitate community feedback to improve public services.
- 3.3 Work in partnership to support voluntary and community organisations to make effective applications for external funding, including exploring the potential for joint Council-voluntary organisation applications, with the objective of diversifying the funding base for local voluntary organisations.

Council commitments

- 3.4 Provide a diversity of funding options, including grants and contracts; ensure smaller organisations have access to make effective funding applications; make sure funding arrangements are fair and sustainable; provide multi-year grants and contracts wherever possible; execute grant and contract agreements and payments in a timely manner.
- 3.5 Increase voluntary and community sector involvement in public service delivery by reducing barriers to funding and promoting opportunities effectively and prioritising best practice in commissioning.
- 3.6 Work with the voluntary and community sector to align funding application and monitoring processes across council departments and funding streams, ensuring they are fair and proportionate, with realistic performance indicators and expectations.
- 3.7 Provide excellent contract management, with officers who help organisations to succeed, and ensure there is always a named person in the Council.
- 3.8 Recognise full cost recovery as good practice in project budgeting, allowing organisations to include a fair share of core operating costs within project funding proposals.
- 3.9 Foster collaboration between small and large organisations; support the set-up of consortia and alliances, where possible.
- 3.10 Make application processes simple, especially taking into consideration the capacity and capability of small organisations; support access for organisations representing communities whose first language is not English.

Voluntary and community sector commitments

- 3.11 Check the organisation is eligible before applying for a grant or contract.
- 3.12 Define outcomes clearly in applications.
- 3.13 Maintain strong governance and risk management and inform funders of significant changes.

- 3.14 Be transparent in monitoring and reporting, using the process to highlight issues and seek support.
- 3.15 Recognise and publicly acknowledge public sector funding contributions.
- 3.16 Seek joint funding opportunities with the public sector.
- 3.17 Share the impact of voluntary and community sector services to inform future funding and service development.

Outcome 4: Clear arrangements for managing changes to programmes and services

Joint commitments

- 1.1 Work collaboratively across sectors and organisations to manage changes; keep service users engaged and informed as much as possible.
- 1.2 When a funded or commissioned service ends, ensure a smooth transition for service users to other services, including the transfer of data and knowledge to the new provider (with due regard to data protection legislation).
- 1.3 Work together to explore how data can be maximised and shared effectively to support decision-making and responding to need.

Council commitments

- 1.4 Take steps to understand where there are gaps in service provision and work with the voluntary and community sector to address unmet need.
- 1.5 If a funded service is encountering problems, agree with the organisation a timetable of actions to improve performance, including signposting to appropriate support, before planning to end a financial relationship.
- 1.6 Assess and mitigate the impact of decisions to reduce or end funding on beneficiaries, service users, volunteers and organisations according to the Council's equality impact assessment process.
- 1.7 Where there are proposed changes to funding, be as transparent and communicative as possible: discuss with organisations the potential implications as early as possible, give organisations the opportunity to respond, and consider the response fully, respecting sector expertise, before making a final decision.
- 1.8 Give a minimum of three months' notice in writing when changing or ending a funding relationship or other support, apart from in exceptional circumstances, and provide a clear rationale for why the decision has been taken.

Voluntary and community sector commitments

- 1.9 Plan for the end of funding to reduce any potential negative impact on beneficiaries and the organisation.
- 1.10 Contribute positively to reviews of programmes and funding practice.

- 1.11 Advise funders on the social, environmental or economic impact of funding changes, particularly to minimise the effect of the changes on people in vulnerable situations.
- 1.12 Advise funders if an organisation is facing funding or other significant difficulties in good time and seek support.
- 1.13 Contribute to the achievement of efficiency savings by maximising resources, cutting costs and collaborating effectively.
- 1.14 Keep Council stakeholders informed when planning service changes.

Outcome 5: An equal and fair society

Joint commitments

- 5.1 Understand the specific needs of disadvantaged and under-represented groups by actively seeking the views of service users. Take these views into account, including assessing impact, when designing and implementing policies, programmes and services.
- 5.2 Take practical action to eliminate unlawful discrimination and racism, advance equality of opportunity and build stronger communities.
- 5.3 Recognise that people may face multiple, overlapping barriers to accessing services.

Council commitments

- 5.4 Work with voluntary and community organisations that represent, support or provide services to people specifically protected by legislation and other under-represented and disadvantaged groups.
- 5.5 Acknowledge that organisations representing specific disadvantaged or under-represented groups can help promote social and community cohesion and should have equitable access to funding.
- 5.6 Take practical action to eliminate unlawful discrimination, advance equality and to ensure a voice for disadvantaged and under-represented groups.

Voluntary and community sector commitments

- 5.7 Ensure that services funded by the Council are open and accessible.
- 5.8 Show how Council-funded services support the Council to fulfil its duties to promote equality and tackle discrimination.

4. Reviewing the Compact

This Compact will be reviewed every three years with an annual review if there are issues that arise.

A full codesign of a new Compact will be conducted in 2028/29, alongside the next iteration of the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy.

5. AGREEMENT

This Compact was agreed at a meeting of COOPERATE on 17th September 2025, co-chaired by Vicky Scott, Tower Hamlets Council for Voluntary Service and Cllr Saied Ahmed, Tower Hamlets Cabinet Member for Resources and the Cost of Living, and adopted by Tower Hamlets Council Cabinet in November 2025.

For more information about the Compact or to contact the Compact Implementation Group, please email BOTH vcs@towerhamlets.gov.uk and compact@thcvs.org.uk

APPENDIX: Implementation of the Compact

1. Principles for compact implementation

We see compact implementation as a positive process that brings colleagues across sectors together to solve problems and do things better.

Having a clearly defined process for monitoring the Compact ensures that difficulties, which may be unintended, can be picked up early, and lead either to a resolution, or to understanding that a resolution of a particular problem might not be possible.

Even with this intention, things will go wrong sometimes. In line with the spirit of the Compact, we will all do our best to handle an issue of concern in relation to the Compact in a transparent, constructive and fair way. Anyone should be able to raise an issue of concern confidently, knowing that there will be no negative ramifications.

We will take a collaborative, problem-solving approach that focuses on strengths, shared goals and mutually agreeable solutions, and all parties will aim to deal with issues that arise in a timely manner.

VCS organisations that contribute to work relating to implementing the Compact will be reimbursed for their time according to the Council's Reward and Recognition Policy.

2. Ownership of the Compact

Ultimate responsibility for implementing the Compact sits with Cooperate, the key statutory-voluntary and community sector board in Tower Hamlets.

3. Compact Champions

Both sectors will nominate Compact Champions. Their role is to help peers from across different council and NHS departments and VCSE organisations to be aware of and understand the purpose of the Compact, to see it as a positive process to help to achieve better partnership working across sectors, and to embed the Compact across various departments and organisations.

The champions should be senior staff of partner organisations, who have the mandate and authority from their sector or organisation to take this leadership role, and have strong influence and communication channels that will give them the ability to embed and support Compact implementation.

4. Compact Implementation Group

The Compact Implementation Group will be the Champions (as outlined above).

The Group will meet a minimum of twice per year. It will report to Cooperate annually. This aims to ensure that Compact-related issues link to local strategic decision-making.

The group will:

- help colleagues across departments and organisations to be aware of, understand and use the Compact
- help pre-empt potential issues by facilitating open discussions about forthcoming commissioning, grants, or consultations
- support the positive resolution of concerns

- provide communication about issues that are successfully resolved
- coordinate learning from issues that have caused concern
- lead the process of reviewing the effectiveness and usefulness of the Compact over time
- coordinate the cycle of refreshing and rewriting the Compact.

The Compact Implementation Group does not handle individual or isolated matters; its purpose is to act where issues are broader in scope or systemic in nature.

The Group will nominate co-chairs – one from each sector.

5. Embedding Compact in grant, contract and asset management processes

We will use the Compact to guide our partnership working on issues relating to commissioned contracts, grants and Council property assets, and encourage managers from both sectors to adopt Compact principles and commitments in their day-to-day work. This could mean for example, a standard question in contract monitoring meetings: “Has our contract management process / property leasing process been Compact-compliant, and is there anything we can do together to improve the process?”

6. Induction

We will encourage Council staff that interact with the voluntary and community sector, and voluntary and community sector staff that interact with the Council to read the Compact as part of their induction.

We will plan and deliver a process of inducting the Compact Champions into their role.

7. Celebrating success

When an issue has been resolved positively for all concerned, we will celebrate this by writing about it in relevant voluntary and community sector newsletters, and highlighting it at relevant awards or celebration ceremonies, where appropriate.

8. Resolving and learning from issues arising

We anticipate that by adopting the processes described in the Compact, issues of concern will be rare.

Stage 1: Direct discussion

- If an individual or organisation believes there has been a falling short of the Compact’s principles or commitments, they should first attempt to resolve the issue directly with the relevant party. The aim is to resolve concerns informally and quickly through discussion and mutual agreement.
- If the issue remains unresolved, they can contact the Compact Implementation Group using the generic email addresses listed in the Compact above.

Stage 2: Review at Compact Implementation Group

- The Compact implementation Group will meet to discuss the issue and suggest a course of action.
- They will provide a response to parties involved.

Stage 3: Referral to Cooperate

- If a matter remains unresolved or is deemed to have wider, systemic implications, it will be referred to a meeting of Cooperate² for review.
- Cooperate will keep the Champions, via the co-chairs, informed as to any policy or procedural changes that have been put into place as a result of something being raised as a Compact issue.

Learning

- We value the learning that will arise from dealing with Compact-related issues, whether or not they are resolved to the full satisfaction of all parties.
- Once per year, the Compact Implementation Group will update Cooperate on how the Compact has been used during the previous year, and, where relevant, produce communications to go out via VCSE and public sector communications channels and networks.
- They will also share learning annually at the Partnership Executive Group.

² 'Cooperate' is Tower Hamlets' forum for strategic collaboration between the voluntary and community sector and the Council.