

Beacon award winner case study

London Borough of Tower Hamlets: getting closer to communities

Summary

Tower Hamlets Council and its partners in the Tower Hamlets Partnership (the borough's LSP) have put engagement with the borough's diverse communities at the heart of community planning processes. The partnership's vision is to improve the quality of life for all who live and work in the borough, with a determined focus on delivering real outcomes for local communities. We have delivered demonstrably improved service outcomes, enhanced by the involvement of local people, across all aspects of service delivery.

Leadership and partnership

The council's role as a community leader is strengthened by its representative elected membership, with 29 of 51 councillors from BME backgrounds, including the country's first Bangladeshi council leader.

Our leadership is exercised through the Tower Hamlets Partnership, whose vision is delivered through the borough's community plan, agreed after extensive consultation with all partners including local residents, businesses, the voluntary and community sector, as well as the public services. The community plan sets out priorities and targets under five key themes, to make Tower Hamlets, by 2010:

- a better place for Living Safely
- a better place for Living Well
- a better place for Learning, Achievement and Leisure
- a better place for Creating and Sharing Prosperity
- a better place for Excellent Public Services

The structure of the Tower Hamlets Partnership enables local people to influence decision-making. No one part is dominant, and the **three** elements work together:

1. Eight **Local Area Partnerships (LAPs)** made up of two or three wards.

The LAPs:

- involve local people in considering ideas for service improvement
- provide forums for scrutinising service performance to ensure that standards are met and promises kept
- were involved in the development of LAP Action Plans, working with area directors and service providers, to identify key local priorities and delivery solutions leading to agreed local outcomes (supported by NRF funding)

- arrange participatory LAP events for local people, rather than formal meetings, focusing on issues that really matter: involvement in these events has more than quadrupled within three years, to around 4,000 people in 2004/05
2. Five **Community Plan Action Groups (CPAG)** for each of the community plan themes.

The CPAGs:

- are made up of key service providers charged with accelerating progress through joined-up services, in line with both national targets and priorities agreed with local people
 - listen to LAPs' views and use them to inform service development
3. A **Partnership Management Group**, which includes four residents, representatives from the CPAGs, from the voluntary and community sector and faith communities, and from young people, councillors and others. This group has strategic responsibility for delivering the community plan and neighbourhood renewal strategy.

Third Sector Involvement

The council and its partners have long recognised the value of involving the voluntary sector in service delivery. This is particularly true of culturally sensitive services and services for hard-to-reach groups. Tower Hamlets' Third Sector Strategy was launched in 2002, and voluntary and community organisations already deliver over £10 million of contracts within the borough, including youth services, disability services and recycling schemes.

Achievements

A selection of examples of engagement and consultation leading to improved outcomes for local people are set out below.

A better place for living safely

- Engagement with young people on one estate resulted in a youth-led clean-up of graffiti; 75 per cent fewer people loitering on the estate; a 90 per cent reduction in drug dealing and 100 per cent reduction in abandoned vehicles.
- A Rapid Response Team identifies and calms potential conflicts between young people in the borough. Youth leaders have strong connections to local communities and promote community cohesion. Three mobile units

provide activities and advice to young people and can be used to target estates where tension may be brewing.

- Tower Hamlets has implemented the Met's 'Safer Neighbourhoods' community policing scheme, two years ahead of the London-wide rollout. The initial pilot in Whitechapel was developed following consultation with local people and stall-holders from the area's busy market.
- The most recent Annual Resident's Survey, 2004-05, showed a nine per cent fall in concern about crime in Tower Hamlets. London overall showed an increase of two per cent.

A better place for living well

Health, housing and social care have all benefited from effective community engagement. There have been notable successes in consultation with key groups, such as older residents; recruitment from the community, particularly of social workers; and communicating key messages to hard-to-reach groups.

Housing Choice

Tower Hamlets is balloting tenants about a transfer of its housing stock, affecting around 36,000 homes, which is raising the investment needed to improve housing conditions. The Tower Hamlets Housing Choice initiative has given real influence to tenants.

- tenants and leaseholders formed a borough-wide compact to lead the process of engagement with the council
- the compact helped design the three-stage ballot for residents
- tenant and leaseholder groups defined the boundaries for the ballot, initially creating 84 constituencies, some of which later merged with neighbours
- in the first stage of the ballot, every constituency voted to find out more about working with a housing association
- the second stage saw the forming and development of estate steering groups and coaching on how they could identify and work with a housing association
- 44 areas have already proceeded to stage three to work with a housing association, leading up to a tenant vote on whether to transfer across to that partner. Of these, eight constituencies have already voted to transfer
- no constituency has yet returned a 'no' vote at any stage of the Housing Choice process

A better place for creating and sharing prosperity

The Tower Hamlets Partnership drives economic development in the borough, particularly through regeneration schemes, and seeks to ensure that all sections of the community are in a position to share in the growing prosperity of Tower Hamlets.

The 'Claim the Max' campaign, to raise awareness of benefit entitlements and break down barriers to employment, has resulted in a projected increase in benefit take-up of over £5 million, and helped 60 Bangladeshi women into training or work.

The London Muslim Centre

The council was a key partner in the establishment of the London Muslim Centre, that opened in June 2004.

More than £4 million was raised through the community for the £10 million centre. £700,000 was provided by the council to support Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) development.

The centre provides 5000 square feet of retail space and 12,000 sq feet of office space. Through ongoing support for new business in the local community, the centre alone is expected to generate approximately 140 new jobs by 2007.

A better place for learning, achievement and leisure

School performance in Tower Hamlets is among the fastest-improving in the country. 76 per cent of the borough's school age population are from BME backgrounds, and a range of initiatives have contributed to improved attainment in these communities including:

- specific schemes to increase the number of BME teachers, teaching assistants and governors
- English classes for parents with English as a second language
- mother tongue classes, enabling young people to gain qualifications in community languages alongside mainstream qualifications

Improving school attendance in partnership (ISAP)

A long-standing cultural issue in Tower Hamlets primary schools meant that children were being taken out of school for extended periods by their families. This was addressed through partnership between the council, schools and the East London Mosque:

- the East London Mosque used community radio broadcasts during Ramadan to convey the importance of school attendance
- the Imam's address at Friday prayers reinforced this message
- communication with parents through tea gatherings at the mosque, home visits and family work

Three years ago, primary attendance in Tower Hamlets was among the lowest in the country. Today, it is among the fastest-improving, and close to the national average.

Attendance in some schools is up by as much as 7 per cent.

A better place for excellent public services

The council and its partners are seeking to develop services that genuinely reflect the needs and aspirations of local people. A cross-cutting approach to involving the voluntary and community sector and developing a workforce to reflect the community leads to services that are responsive, informed and culturally appropriate.

Tower Hamlets Community Recycling Consortium

One of the challenges facing the borough is how to motivate local people to recycle more of their household waste. Around 80 per cent of homes are high-rise, making it particularly difficult to meet recycling targets. The solution was found in contracting with a third sector consortium, whose local knowledge and understanding of cultural sensitivities helped build a productive relationship with residents. The consortium has also made a significant contribution to providing training and employment opportunities for local people.

The consortium:

- services 45,000 households, making it Europe's largest high-rise doorstep recycling scheme
- employs 60 full time and 20 part time staff; 90 per cent of these jobs have gone to local people, half from BME communities.

Over the next year, the consortium's service will extend to cover 100 per cent of the borough's high rise households.

Public participation in the scheme is around 60 per cent, almost three times the national average for other waste management companies.

Developing a workforce to reflect the community

Tower Hamlets has a strong commitment to developing a representative workforce and providing equality of opportunity to local people. A range of specific and successful initiatives have been developed.

Targeted and supported recruitment, training and development schemes for local people from BME backgrounds, exist in both Education and Social Services. Both encourage continual professional development: the Education scheme provides opportunities for Teaching Assistants to undertake a teaching qualification.

Social Services' 'Positive Action Scheme' provides a range of entry levels and financial support for trainee social workers. Both schemes have increased the proportion of the workforce from BME backgrounds, and have contributed to significant improvements in educational attainment and a three-star rating from the CSCI respectively.

The Council also operates a corporate BME graduate scheme, which places local graduates throughout the authority.

Measuring success

The most recent Annual Residents' Survey 2004/05 shows some pleasing trends against both the previous year, and the picture across London:

- concern about crime has fallen in the borough by 9 per cent, compared to a 2 per cent increase across London
- concern about health has fallen by 4 per cent from last year's position, and remains significantly less of a concern in Tower Hamlets than across London
- 47 per cent of residents believed that the council "involves residents in decision making". This is an increase of 5 per cent from last year, and is 8 per cent above the inner-London average

Where residents were asked questions relating to the community around them, the balance of responses demonstrates a clear sense of cohesion and ownership:

- 68 per cent of respondents agreed that "this local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well". This rose to 73 per cent for Asian respondents
- 75 per cent of people feel they "belong to the local area"