

# A Tower Hamlets Residents' Manifesto

**Ten ideas for a brighter, poverty-free future that we  
shape together**

**April 2022**

We are a group of 30 Tower Hamlets residents, working together with the research and policy team at Toynbee Hall. Many of us are community researchers in our borough, investigating the issues that are important to us, like poverty, safety and housing.

There is so much to be proud of about Tower Hamlets. But there are also many challenges. Tower Hamlets is home to much extreme wealth, but this wealth is only enjoyed by a few. Too many of us are stuck in a cycle of poverty and debt. We live in overcrowded and/or unaffordable housing with no option for better except to leave the borough we call home. Many of us feel unsafe and unheard. We want more opportunities for ourselves and our families to live in a brighter future, and for the wealth created in the borough to benefit everybody.

We have shaped, conducted and analysed much of the research in this manifesto, and developed the proposals over the last five years. Our proposals are developed in the context of what provision already does, and does not, exist and seek to build on good initiatives, as well as fill policy gaps. We have tested out the support for the proposals through a survey conducted over two weeks with over 180 local residents, and this input has shaped our manifesto priorities.

We need the next Mayor of Tower Hamlets to have big ambitions for the residents of this borough. We believe this can be achieved by supporting and taking action on our proposal priorities developed by the people who know best what they need - our residents.

## A Tower Hamlets where wealth is shared

The next Mayor of Tower Hamlets must commit to tackling wealth inequality in the borough by harnessing the immense spending, hiring, and training power of businesses, hospitals, universities, housing associations and the Council.

Our priorities

1. Make sure large employers in Tower Hamlets hire and offer training opportunities to local people, especially those on low incomes. (87% support, 37% chose this as their top recommendation to tackle wealth inequality in the borough)

The Mayor should campaign for local employers to provide good work for local people, particularly those on low incomes. Low-income residents need progression roles, with secure jobs that provide wrap-around training and mentoring. They should encourage - and where they have powers to do so, require - large employers to allocate a quota of jobs to Tower Hamlets residents who are unemployed or earning less than the London Living Wage with a package of wrap-around support to help them to develop.

86% of Tower Hamlets residents with a higher level qualification are in employment compared to just one third of those with no qualifications. These progression roles should be targeted at underemployed groups, specifically 16 – 24 year olds, 50 – 64 years old, BAME women and disabled residents in the borough (London Borough of Tower Hamlets, 2020<sup>1</sup>). The jobs provided by large Tower Hamlets employers must pay at least London Living Wage as part of a broader campaign for better take-up of London Living Wage in the borough.

Supporting more residents into better work requires a joined-up approach between employers, the local authority, statutory and third sector services. The next Mayor can take inspiration from Local Government Association proposals on how use effective partnership working to tackle poverty through employment (Local Government Association, 2019).

Finally, the Mayor should actively seek support from other local authorities who have been successful in using procurement to keep wealth in their boroughs to learn how to make our own policies more impactful. Preston City Council provides a flagship model for procurement that has significantly increased financial support for local and socially responsible suppliers. Lewisham and Newham Council are taking the lead in innovating versions of this model in London and can offer learning in how to make procurement a more powerful tool for sharing wealth within Tower Hamlets.

2. Introduce a programme where all state school children in the borough are given vouchers for activities clubs or classes. (87% support, 34% chose this as their top recommendation to tackle wealth inequality in the borough)

In our borough, 56% of children live in poverty (Trust for London, 2021). This equates to about 17 children in a class of 30 and is the highest rate of child poverty in the UK (London Borough of Tower Hamlets, 2021<sup>2</sup>). This is unacceptable. The Mayor must do more to help level the playing field of opportunity at an early age. One way to do this is by providing all state school children in the borough with vouchers to either try out a range of classes/clubs or to enable participation in one activity that a child can be involved with throughout the year.

Other popular proposals to tackle wealth inequality in the borough:

- Make sure every resident on a low income has access to a mentor who can help them develop in their career (ideally someone from a similar background). (80% support, 21% chose this as their top recommendation to tackle wealth inequality in the borough)

The Mayor should better promote existing schemes and support co-ordination of the Mayor of London's funding for mentors for young people. But far beyond this, the Mayor should champion a wider programme where employers in Tower Hamlets are incentivised and supported to offer good quality mentorship opportunities shaped by jobseekers. This needs to be accompanied by a recruitment drive for more mentors who have experienced barriers to work themselves.

Where do these proposals to tackle wealth inequality come from?

[Tower Hamlets Poverty Review \(Toynbee Hall, 2021\)](#): 27 Tower Hamlets residents with direct experience of poverty developed proposals for this project. They felt wealth produced in the borough should be used to tackle poverty, and this could be done by employing local people and prioritising purchase of local goods and services. Residents also wanted the opportunity to work in the borough where they live. One of the key areas which participants highlighted was that children in low-income families should be able to participate in the same activity clubs as wealthier children, as well as having the opportunity to explore which activities they might enjoy.

[Pandemic Stories \(Toynbee Hall, 2021\)](#): We worked with 17 peer researchers at risk of being disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 crisis and a further 50 interviewees. The majority of researchers and survey respondents lived in Tower Hamlets. To tackle the financial crisis of low-income families, they developed proposals for co-designed, personalised employment support with extra resources available for those facing barriers to finding work. Mentorship schemes were considered a key way to help people facing inequality to progress. They proposed a scheme where mentors in employment could be linked with a mentee from a similar background to provide support, encouragement and skill development. There are several mentorship schemes that support young people in Tower Hamlets and the Workpath staff team provide mentoring for adults. However, the borough is missing a high-profile mentorship offer shaped by jobseekers to meet their needs.

Young Londoners Mental Health Support Co-design (Toynbee Hall, 2021): We facilitated co-design workshops with 39 young Londoners, with 73 participating in our survey. 19 of the young people surveyed were from Tower Hamlets. They advocated for holistic mentoring that could help provide emotional support and career progression for young Londoners. They also felt hiring staff that reflect the diversity of the local community could improve quality of services by improving access and inclusion. People of all ages in several of our research

projects have said that better diversity hiring practices would be helpful including in our report on making debt advice more accessible, [“We’re not on a conveyor belt; Developing Advice Services in London”](#) (Toynbee Hall, 2021).

## A place where we feel connected

Our research findings highlight that residents believe more connected communities are key drivers of safer, thriving neighbourhoods.

Our priorities

1. Make sure every area has a community centre where residents can socialise, get help from services and speak to decision-makers. (90% support, 39% chose this as their top recommendation to help residents feel more connected with one another)

The Mayor should actively identify areas where residents currently have no or limited access to a community centre offering opportunities to socialise, learn new skills, connect to local services and speak to decision-makers, and draw up a plan for addressing any gaps in provision.

2. Make sure every resident has access to a free or cheap local space to run community activities. (88% support, 22% chose this as their top recommendation to feel more connected with one another)

The Mayor should instigate a review to map where there is free or cheap local space that can be booked by locals to run community activities, and work with partners to co-ordinate affordable provision.

Other popular proposals to help residents feel more connected with one another:

- Make sure there are enough public toilets including Changing Places toilets. (82% support, 21% chose this as their top recommendation to help residents feel more connected with one another)

The Mayor must take the lead in mapping out where in the borough public toilets are needed, ensuring they are well maintained and clean to use, and filling in ‘toilet deserts’. It is essential we improve the provision of public toilets, including Changing Places toilets, so that disabled and older residents can participate in society. 87% of respondents who are 65+ and 89% of disabled respondents support this proposal.

- Make sure there is training and support for residents to work with neighbours on local issues. (86% support, 9% chose this as their top recommendation to help residents feel more connected with one another)

The Mayor should collaborate with registered providers to offer opportunities to build residents' capacity to self-organise in response to local needs or problems. Registered providers will be required to offer empowerment programmes as part of The Charter for Social Housing Residents. With the support of the council, this could become a joined-up offer across the borough available to all residents. The training should centre on key skills, such as organising effective public meetings, conflict management, and budgeting.

- Support residents across Tower Hamlets to be digitally connected and confident using technology. (87% support, 10% chose this as their top recommendation to help people feel more connected with one another)

The Mayor should focus on neighbourhood level initiatives to improve digital connectivity and skills. The business sector, telecommunications companies, housing providers and people with lived experience of digital exclusion should innovate together to develop and pilot solutions, so that internet access is affordable or, even better, free. The Mayor can provide funding for partnerships and broker strategic relationships across the borough. We are piloting such a scheme on the Rogers Estate, with provision of laptops in community spaces with computer support provided by young residents to older residents.

Where do these proposals to help residents feel more connected come from?

[Tower Hamlets Poverty Review \(Toynbee Hall, 2021\)](#): 27 residents with direct experience of poverty proposed the need for community hubs where there are opportunities to socialise, learn new skills, connect to local services and speak to decision-makers in one place. The Bromley by Bow Centre is cited by many as an example of somewhere that does all of these things well.

[Safer Homes and Neighbourhoods Participatory Action Research \(Toynbee Hall, 2021\)](#): We are working with more than 30 Tower Hamlets residents in the Globe Road area of Tower Hamlets who want the Council to help them access underused local community spaces. Council-owned venues like The Tramshed are meant to be community hubs but are often not affordable. One young girl at a workshop there said she'd walked past it every day but had never been inside. Residents have told us how important it is for them and their children to have somewhere else safe to go as they live in overcrowded homes. The need for more opportunities to connect with neighbours in order to feel safe came out strongly in the survey of 224 Tower Hamlets residents conducted as part of this peer-led research; community space is an important part of that.

[Pandemic Stories \(Toynbee Hall, 2021\)](#): During the pandemic and moving forward, people want more spaces to participate in community life and decision-making. These spaces can be both physical and virtual. While it has been difficult for some to use community spaces because of COVID-19, many felt that there was a lack of community spaces even before the pandemic. There is a need for clarity and transparency over what a space is for and who can get involved. Some felt that they could take the lead in community action with their neighbours if they only had some ownership over a physical space. The recommendation for a neighbourhood-based approach was developed by community researchers.

[You Don't Really Know People 'Til You Talk to Them \(Toynbee Hall, 2018\)](#): Research led by 20 older people with another 500 older people taking part in surveys found a strong need for accessible and drug-free public toilets in Tower Hamlets. Many older people described making a decision about whether to take a journey depending on whether toilets would be available. Our partnership work with REAL on this issue has shown the importance of Changing Place toilets for severely disabled people to be included in this strategy. This is crucial for them to be able to socialise and take part in society.

## A place where we feel safe

Findings across our research projects showed that Tower Hamlets residents want to feel safer.

Our priorities

1. Invest in youth clubs and youth programmes in Tower Hamlets, ensuring that they are youth-led and designed with young people. (92% of survey support, 29% chose this as their top recommendation to tackle safety issues in the borough)

The Mayor needs to invest more in youth clubs and youth programmes in Tower Hamlets and to make a commitment to youth leadership and co-design as a requirement of successful funding applications. There is youth provision in Tower Hamlets, but we hear repeatedly that it is patchy and does not provide the activities that young people want. The best way to create provision that is valued by young people is for them to be involved in designing and leading it. 95% of 15-24 year olds surveyed support this recommendation. This begins with a peer-led needs assessment of current provision.

2. Work with residents, particularly women, on a strategy to ensure people feel safe travelling through the borough at night. (91% support, 24% chose this as their top recommendation to tackle safety issues in the borough)

The Mayor should make sure that all residents feel safe to travel in the borough at night, particularly women, for example by improving lighting in green spaces. Good work is already taking place in the borough with the police convening women leaders to identify what could help and the police and council holding regular women's safety walks. But this work needs to go further and include more residents. A strategy should be developed in collaboration with a representative group of Tower Hamlets women and other stakeholders with expertise in interventions that have worked in similar boroughs.

Other popular proposals to tackle safety issues in the borough:

- Make sure there are genuinely accessible opportunities for residents to speak with police, council and housing association representatives about personal safety concerns. (89% of survey respondents support, 22% chose this as their top recommendation to tackle safety issues in the borough).

Often the opportunities available to voice concerns around safety only work for people who are financially better off, speak English and have never experienced institutional reasons to be scared of the police. The Mayor can support the design of forums where everyone feels welcome and confident enough to participate in community-wide discussions about safety. This could be the development of new types of TRAs and safer neighbourhood ward panels that are genuinely welcoming and inclusive. Provision of interpreters, food, incentives and providing child friendly spaces would make these spaces more inclusive. The Mayor needs to work with registered providers and the police to make sure every resident who wants to participate feels they can.

- Make sure that if residents raise a safety issue, they feel listened to and receive a response. (90% support, 15% chose this as their top recommendation to tackle safety issues in the borough)

The Mayor should make sure that residents feel sure that if they raise a safety issue, they feel listened to and receive a response from the police, council or housing association. This could look like 'you said, we did' reports published quarterly at a local level online and through written mediums.

- Tackle the stigmatization of young people who are often blamed for crime and anti-social behaviour. (81% of survey respondents in favour, 10% chose this as their top recommendation to tackle safety issues in the borough)

Young people can feel older people presume they are to blame for crime and anti-social behaviour issues and sometimes feel that their community fear or do not value them. The Mayor should consider working with MOPAC to tackle the stigmatization of young people in the borough. They should also create opportunities for young people and older adults to build relationships where they live, for example, through intergenerational mentorship schemes or computer support.

Where do these proposals to tackle safety issues in the borough come from?

[Safer Homes and Neighbourhoods Participatory Action Research \(Toynbee Hall, 2021\)](#): The proposals were developed with peer researchers in response to issues around exclusion of certain groups from decision-making about safety, poor satisfaction rates with responses to safety concerns from police, local councils and housing associations, and the detrimental impact that blame for safety issues has on young people.

Young Londoners' Mental Health Co-Design project (Toynbee Hall, 2021): Young Londoners told us that to improve their wellbeing, youth clubs and youth programmes need to be well resourced, and co-designed with opportunities for young people to take leadership roles. Participants also liked the idea of intergenerational support through mentoring. One young person put forward the idea of young people and older people who are struggling with similar issues being paired up and doing activities together. They liked the idea in particular as while the focus is on having fun, around that both groups of people can develop, with young people finding mentors and both, but particularly older people who can often be experiencing loneliness, finding companionship.

## A place where everyone can have a good home

Our research shows housing is a big issue for many Tower Hamlets residents, in terms of affordability, overcrowding and the effect on communities of short-term lets.

Our priorities

1. Commit to building more genuinely affordable four and five bed properties to deal with overcrowding in the borough. (80% support, 39% chose this as their top recommendation to make sure everyone can have a good home in the borough)

This commitment should be reflected in specific policies such as the borough's Local Plan or other planning guidance. The Mayor should ensure that the Council leads by example, by committing to offering more family-sized homes in any development schemes funded or otherwise supported by Tower Hamlets. 86% of Bangladeshi and 86% of wider BAME respondents supported this recommendation.

2. Call for London to be given the power to tackle its affordability crisis, for example, through introducing rent controls. (85% support, 36% chose this as their top recommendation to make sure everyone can have a good home in the borough)

The cost of housing is a huge driver of financial hardship amongst residents who rent privately in the borough. Tower Hamlets has one of the largest gaps between local housing allowance and rents in London (London Borough of Tower Hamlets, 2021). The Mayor needs to be a leading voice in calls for London to be given funding and powers to explore the best approach to make renting more affordable in the capital, which will directly benefit Tower Hamlets residents.

Other popular proposals to make sure everyone can have a good home in the borough:

- Make sure when residents seek support with their housing they are not put at risk of immigration enforcement. (81% support, 13% chose this as their top recommendation to make sure everyone can have a good home in the borough)

The Mayor should pledge that there will be no collaboration between their work enforcing housing standards and the Home Office or Border Force. They should follow the lead of Haringey Council in making a public commitment not to encourage or permit their homelessness and housing teams to work with border enforcement (London Borough of Haringey, 2019)

- Take action to make sure Airbnb accommodation doesn't have a negative impact on local communities. (71% support, 13% chose this as their top recommendation to make sure everyone can have a good home in the borough)

Airbnb accommodation and short-term lets can be damaging to residents' sense of safety, due to the constant rotation of strangers on their estates. Airbnb accommodation also takes housing that could become homes from the market. The Mayor should investigate how to reduce the impact of AirBnbs on community cohesion at a neighbourhood level.

Where do these proposals to make sure everyone can have a good home in the borough come from?

[Pandemic Stories \(Toynbee Hall, 2021\)](#): Advice providers should target housing associations and supported accommodation with accessible publicity materials that reach the digitally excluded, disabled and people who do not have English as their first language. Advice services should also work with the support staff of housing providers to publicise information about these services via word of mouth to residents. We also found during the pandemic that people with irregular migration statuses do not approach the council for help and support for fear of immigration enforcement.

[Rent Move Repeat \(Toynbee Hall, 2021\)](#): The affordability crisis is damaging the finances and wellbeing of young private renters in East London. A key call from peer researchers is for the implementation of a landlord register to provide enough data for Mayor of London to assess the best approach to bringing down rents.

[Tower Hamlets Poverty Review \(Toynbee Hall, 2021\)](#): Overcrowding is a serious issue in the borough, with large families having little option to move into larger homes.

## A council that communicates and makes decisions with residents

A strong theme in all our research projects is that residents want to have more accessible opportunities to have an input in decision-making. They also want better communication about what is available in the borough.

Our priorities

1. Agree with residents what success looks like and how to measure it in areas such as tackling poverty, housing and community safety, to improve accountability (90% support, 30% chose this as their top recommendation to create better communication and resident-participation).

The current Mayor put considerable resources into creating engagement across the borough to inform the Tower Hamlets Plan in 2017. We support these efforts. However, too many residents still feel they have not had a say about what success looks like and do not know how to assess the success of the council. In the next term, the Mayor should host a series of inclusive forums reaching an even wider range of residents, and co-designing the priorities and the KPIs. This process should be publicised widely, as should the yearly results. The KPIs should include the proportion of residents who feel they have been consulted on and understand how success itself is measured.

2. Create a range of inclusive ways for residents to be 'heard' in council decision-making. (93% support, 26% chose this as their top recommendation to create better communication and resident-participation).

The Mayor should create a range of inclusive forums for residents to be 'heard' in decision-making, and make those forums inclusive by design. The Mayor should go beyond consultation, co-designing strategies with residents with lived experience of exclusion, creating inclusive forums for them to have their say in budgeting, and creating a residents scrutiny panel to assess council decision-making.

Other popular proposals to create better communication and resident-participation:

- Make sure residents know what advice and support is available to them, using digital, written and verbal communication to help reach all residents. (89% support, 22% chose this as their top recommendation to create better communication and resident-participation).

Tower Hamlets is a borough that has much more advice provision than many other London authorities, yet our research shows that many older, digitally excluded and/or BAME

residents are not accessing the advice they need. The Mayor should invest in communication strategies that support even the most marginalised residents to access the advice that exists.

- Make sure health, youth, and advice services are designed with the residents who need them by making co-design a requirement of funding. (88% support, 23% chose this as their top recommendation to create better communication and resident-participation).

The Mayor should champion co-design of key services in the borough through making co-design a requirement of commissioning.

Where do these proposals to create better communication and resident-participation come from?

[Tower Hamlets Poverty Review \(Toynbee Hall, 2021\)](#): One of the recommendations was for the council to host monthly workshops with residents to discuss among other things: council plans; updates on available support for low-income residents; and how the council is evaluating services and policies, as well as how residents can get involved in this.

In a meeting with Rachel Blake on the back of the poverty review, residents also spoke about their desire to meet with council representatives more often and have more opportunities to co-design solutions.

Residents also advocated for the council sharing information through community liaison officers in schools as well as supporting schools to ensure they remain in place. Community liaison officers were seen as a way the council could share information with families through a trusted person who knows the family and the school community well.

[Pandemic Stories \(Toynbee Hall, 2021\)](#): One of the recommendations on the back of this research was to further develop a 'listening infrastructure' into London council and GLA decision making and build participatory policy-making into processes to help achieve fairer outcomes.

["We're not a conveyor belt" \(Toynbee Hall, 2021\)](#): Findings from our peer-led research around co-designing better, more inclusive advice services suggest that hosting workshops and engaging with people through other institutions that they trust and spend their time in such as schools, mosques and churches. This can help to reach people and help them feel empowered to engage as they are in a place where they feel comfortable already.

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