

# Transforming Education for All: the Tower Hamlets Story

**‘What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy’**

*– John Dewey*



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# 1 Tower Hamlets in context

## 1.1 A London Borough

Tower Hamlets covers an area of just less than 8 square miles, yet is home to more than 234,000 people, making it one of London's smallest but most densely populated Boroughs. It is bounded by the River Thames to the south, the River Lea to the east, the Borough of Hackney to the north and the City of London to the west, and it forms part of the East London Sub-Region.

Tower Hamlets is rich in heritage and cultural diversity. Its name conveys as much: it grew out of the jumble of medieval buildings around the walls of William the Conqueror's Tower of London. Its river frontage fostered ship building, which began to develop in the 16th century, and the Port of London stimulated associated trades: cheap inns, victualling, and chandlery. By the late 18th century, factories and rows of terraced houses consumed the once rural landscape, except for pockets of land saved for parks and gardens, in particular Victoria Park, Stepney Green, Bethnal Green Gardens and Island Gardens. The maritime character of the hamlets was transformed during the 19th century. With the building of huge warehouses and high walled docks, and the arrival of central London railway termini which displaced people from the city, the area became known – pejoratively – as the 'East End'. Between the late 19th and late 20th centuries, the area was synonymous with poverty, overcrowding and disease. Wages were low and housing poor. During the mid-20th century, bombing during the Second World War devastated much of the area – 24,000 homes and much of its industry were lost.

The post-war period saw the decline of the traditional dock industries, leaving substantial areas of land and buildings vacant and derelict. As a result, part of the Borough was designated as an economic development zone and since 1980 there has been massive expansion of new industries and employment. In parallel, the Borough's physical landscape has also been repeatedly transformed.

Due to its location on the fringe of the City of London the Borough has historically attracted new immigrant communities when finding a place to settle. In the Middle Ages, sailors and merchants from all over Europe and beyond, sailing into the port of London established roots in Tower Hamlets. Since the 18th century, the Spitalfields area has been home to new Huguenot, and later Irish and Ashkenazi Jewish communities who gradually moved to other areas as they grew in prosperity. Following this pattern, in the late 20th century people from Bangladesh and other Asian and African countries were attracted to this area

resulting in a richly diverse multi-cultural population. On Brick Lane, a single building conveys much of this long history of cultural transformation: a Huguenot church in the 17th century, it became a base for Christian conversion of Jews, later a synagogue and is now a mosque (Lichtenstein, 2007).

## 1.2 The economic and social context of education in Tower Hamlets

In 2012, there were estimated to be 65,269 children and young people aged 0-19 in Tower Hamlets, representing 26% of its total population. This number is expected to grow by 7% to 2015 and further growth is expected by 2025. In 2012, 89% of the school population were classified as belonging to an ethnic group other than White British, compared to 26% in England overall. Furthermore, English is an additional language for 74% of its pupils, so that English, Sylheti and Bengali are the most commonly recorded spoken languages in the area. Of those children and young people under 19 years, 55% come from a Bangladeshi background.

Child poverty rates for 2006 show that 28,870 children – or 60.5% of all children in Tower Hamlets – were living in poverty, based on the proportion of children

living in families in receipt of out of work benefits or tax credits where their reported income was less than 60% median outcome. The Borough's high levels of child poverty are also evident in the high proportion of children entitled to Free School Meals (FSM) which in 2011 stood at 57%. Press coverage and academic studies alike describe Tower Hamlets as one of the poorest boroughs in the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> See e.g. <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/children-in-tower-hamlets-are-poorest-in-uk-with-42-per-cent-living-below-breadline-8502616.html>; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-16483257>; Dorling, D.

As a result, Tower Hamlets' children and young people have an exceptional range of additional needs. There were 1,582 children and young people registered with the Council as having a disability in February, 2012 and there were 6,909 children – 17% of a total 2011 school census population of 39,596 – registered as requiring School Action or School Action Plus in response to their educational needs, and a further 1,392 (4%) with a statement of special educational needs (SEN). Finally, there were 296 Looked After Children (LAC), 274 children with child protection plans and 1,155 children in need cases at March 31, 2012. By any measure, this is a demanding population.

There are 98 schools in the Borough. Of these, 70 are primary schools (of which one is an academy), 15 secondary schools (including one academy), a pupil referral unit and six special and short stay schools. Early Years provision is delivered through the private and voluntary sector in over 53 settings and there are six Local Authority maintained nurseries. In each of the Borough's four paired Local Area Partnerships there are three main Children's Centres, which act as hubs for their local community.

## 2 The outline story: an education transformation

### 2.1 1997 - 1998: unacceptable performance

In September, 1997 Christine Gilbert was appointed by Tower Hamlets Local Authority as the Borough's new Corporate Director of Education. The legacy Gilbert inherited can be described as dire: the previous year had seen the publication by Ofsted of *'The Teaching of Reading in 45 London Primary Schools'* (Ofsted, 1996). Based on the results of 45 inspections in Islington, Southwark and Tower Hamlets, the report found that reading standards in Tower Hamlets were poor and that the quality of teaching in many schools was also unsatisfactory or poor. Not only this, but earlier in 1997 the Borough had been positioned 149th out of 149 local education authorities in terms of its performance. But there was perhaps worse to come: the Ofsted Inspection of Tower Hamlets carried out in February and May, 1998 and published in September, 1998.

Ofsted's report was stark, and damning. But it was not simply the conclusions: the Chief Inspector of Schools insisted that the report be presented in full to the whole Council. All of Tower Hamlets' elected representatives should hear the conclusions: that their education service, the best funded service in the country, was failing. Only 26% of pupils gained five or more higher-grade GCSEs, compared to a national average of 43%. Only 47% of pupils achieved level 4 in the Key Stage 2 English tests, compared with 63% nationally. 'These figures,' concluded the report starkly, 'are unacceptable, because they represent lost potential and a denial of the legitimate aspirations of pupils and their parents ... They also represent a poor use of public money. The evidence does not suggest that the expenditure deployed to combat disadvantage in Tower Hamlets since its incorporation in 1990 has achieved its primary objective of raising standards. The reasons for this are complex, and the onus for failure lies with the schools as well as the LEA, but to have used resources inefficiently is doubly unacceptable in so deprived a context' (Ofsted, 1998, para 8-9).

The Local Authority had been complacent about its performance. Only a year or so earlier, the Council Leader had written to the Times defending its schools and its teachers as 'doing a good job'. But the Ofsted conclusion was devastating: ill-conceived structural change in the working of the Authority had been expensive, pushing up the costs of administration and neglecting the urgent needs of children. Costs were high and effectiveness low. In 1998 the Authority spent £3,680 per pupil compared to a national average of £2,605, but retained £1,208 per pupil of which £170 was used to fund central services (Ofsted, 1998,



para 26). Attainment on entry to school was low, and remained low at every key stage. Following a 1994 re-organisation of education support, 'strategic planning ... largely came to a standstill' (Ofsted, 1998: 40), which Ofsted described as 'inexcusable'. The Advisory Service lacked the skills to support the implementation of literacy improvement; support for special needs was inconsistent and patchy: 'Almost half the schools are critical of the support they have received', which Ofsted described as 'an unacceptable figure'.

This was a call to action to the Council, but for all the deep challenges, the Ofsted team recognised that Christine Gilbert was 'fully aware of the shortcomings ... [and] unequivocal about the need to raise standards urgently, and has won the enthusiastic assent of Headteachers to a more challenging and ambitious approach' (Ofsted, 1998: 18). Two things were necessary as the basis for improvement: a comprehensive and coherent plan for change, and the political and community will to implement it.

## **2.2 2000: first signs of improvement**

In response to such serious concerns Ofsted returned after two years to re-inspect Tower Hamlets. They found that the LEA had achieved a great deal since the first inspection. Very significant progress had been made in increasing the level of delegated funding to schools and reducing the cost of centrally provided services. Although pupil test results remained below the national average, the gap had started to narrow at each key stage, and there had been some significant achievements in raising standards. Data from school Ofsted inspections showed an improvement in the proportion of schools judged to be Good or Very Good and that there had been a decline in the proportion of schools requiring improvement. There had also been a continued improvement in attendance in both primary and secondary schools, although still below national averages. Headteachers, Governors and Members all expressed their confidence in the leadership of the Director and senior officers. Key features of LEA leadership now included effective consultation with Headteachers, Governors and other stakeholders, good strategic planning, the development of effective working partnerships with schools, and high expectations for the performance of schools and LEA services. Education was consistently well supported by the Council and seen as its top priority and schools were very well funded. In contrast to the 1990s, Fair Funding and Best Value principles had been introduced to reduce costs, increase delegation to schools and develop

much more effective services. Members were consistent in their support for education priorities and displayed a good grasp of the issues facing schools (many were parents and Governors), and were prepared to take tough decisions to secure improvements. Ofsted praised the Education Development Plan with its clear priorities including raising standards of literacy and numeracy, improving teaching and learning and strengthening leadership and the large number of initiatives and activities to support school improvement. They noted that the LEA had been good at anticipating the national agenda. The report concluded that in a relatively short space of time 'the LEA had gone from having significant weaknesses to delivering all of the functions inspected at least satisfactorily and often well'. However, there was still much to do in continuing to narrow the gap between the performance of pupils and schools in the Borough and that nationally, although Ofsted expressed confidence that Tower Hamlets had the determination and expertise to achieve this.

### **2.3 2005: dramatic improvement**

Going forward some five years to the first Annual Performance Assessment of Tower Hamlets Education and Social Care Services (in 2005) there had been dramatic improvements. In terms of service management there was said to be a clear, strategic vision for children's services shared by Members, senior officers and partner agencies with 'sound financial management, leadership and accountability'. High quality data was further strengthening performance management across the service with good use being made of needs analysis to inform planning and priorities which were 'both ambitious and challenging'. The education service had a clear knowledge of its strengths and weaknesses and action was being taken to bring about further improvements. School standards were now described as mainly Good or Very Good. Attainment at Key Stages 1 and 2 was well above that of statistical neighbours as was the proportion of pupils gaining 5 A\*-C grades; gaps too were narrowing but still below national averages. Attainment at Key Stage 3, however, was relatively low. Support for schools causing concern was described as Good and the number of schools in a category of concern had been reduced from 40 in 1995 to three in December, 2004 due to robust systems of monitoring, intervention and support in proportion to identified needs and improved school leadership.

Overall the inspectors judged Tower Hamlets to be a service that 'consistently delivered well above minimum requirements for users' and awarded the highest



grade (4) on a scale of 1 to 4. In the next Annual Performance Assessment (2006) the management of the Authority's services for children and young people was again judged to be Outstanding overall with excellent capacity to improve further. Education standards continued to improve across all key stages and at Key Stage 2 they came into line with national averages in English and mathematics – an important breakthrough for Tower Hamlets' primary schools. Again in the 2007 Annual Performance Assessment, standards over time at all key stages were said to be improving at a faster rate than nationally. Children and young people were making good progress, well above national rates, between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 and the proportion obtaining five or more GCSEs at A\*-C grades was in line with the national average for the first time although still well below in terms of 5 A\*-C grades including English and mathematics (5 A\*-CEM). The closing of substantial gaps between the performance of those from Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean heritage and the national average were cited as examples of the Authority's success in raising standards for all of its children and young people. There was praise too for the Authority's strong leadership with schools in maintaining a relentless focus on raising attendance, with both primary and secondary schools in line with national averages. Fixed term exclusion rates were lower than similar authorities and national rates in both primary and secondary schools. Permanent exclusions in secondary schools, albeit reducing, were, however, above national rates. The Authority's high quality challenge and support to schools in raising standards was recognised nationally by the award of Beacon status in school improvement and early intervention work. The improvement in school inspection outcomes had continued to a point where now a significantly higher proportion of schools (72%) had been graded Good or Outstanding for their effectiveness in comparison to 56% in similar authorities; furthermore, the number of schools in a category of concern was lower than similar authorities.

The last Ofsted Annual Performance Assessment was written in December, 2008 before this system of monitoring was discontinued. Tower Hamlets still retained its Grade 4 rating and the judgement that it ‘consistently delivered outstanding services for children and young people’, illustrating a continuing improvement upon its previous best performance. Service management was said to be of a very high quality, leadership was excellent and performance management very effective with the Council demonstrating an outstanding capacity to improve. An extract from the report related to the overall effectiveness of children’s services reads as follows:

***The Council is highly ambitious for its children and young people. Excellent partnership work ensures a joined up, cohesive, multi-agency approach to service delivery. The determination to overcome considerable social and economic barriers, improve outcomes and reduce inequalities is shared by all with considerable success ... sustained improvements in educational outcomes for children and young people is rapidly narrowing the gap between children in Tower Hamlets and those nationally*** (page 3).

In less than 10 years Tower Hamlets had moved from a position where it was heavily criticised for a lack of strategic planning, poor management of its services which were not serving its schools and their pupils well, and a culture of low expectations to one in which it was being praised for its high quality services, sustained improvement in education outcomes, excellent partnership work and being highly ambitious for its children and young people.

Critically Tower Hamlets was now consistently outperforming its statistical neighbours on almost every measure and beginning to reach and even exceed national averages. Performance in early years and primary schools was particularly good (interview data with Borough officials suggests that early on a focus was placed on early years, despite there being a lack of school places. In addition that: “early years is still a massive priority for Tower Hamlets”: TH official 1). And although the rate of improvement in secondary schools was higher than elsewhere and matching national averages in 5 A\*-C passes, on the crucial new measure of 5 A\*-CEM the Borough was still below London and national averages, which laid down the challenge for the next few years along with improving the proportion of young people achieving level 2 and level 3 qualifications at age 19.

## 2.4 After 2008: accelerated and sustained success

Although there has been no overall Ofsted inspection report since December, 2008 the Council education committee minutes, reports from education officers to scrutiny panels together with schools' evidence and data, tell the story of continuous improvement in the performance of the pupils and schools of Tower Hamlets in attainment and progress measures as well as school inspection outcomes.<sup>2</sup> By 2011 at Key Stage 4, 61.4% of Tower Hamlets pupils achieved five or more A\*-CEM, exceeding the national average for the first time. Progress rates in both English and maths from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 bucked the national trend: no secondary schools were below the DfE floor and the vast majority had been judged to be Good and Outstanding. This success was confirmed in the 2012 performance data where Tower Hamlets exceeded the national average by over 2 percentage points in 5 A\*-CEM (61.4%) and in terms of expected progress between Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 exceeded the national average by 4.4 percentage points in English and by 5 points in maths. In particular FSM pupils performed very well (54% 5 A\*-CEM compared to 36% nationally) – there was thus an achievement gap of only seven percentage points compared to a national gap of 23. The achievement of LAC, while below that of their borough peers, is better than the national picture: in 2011/12, 23.5% of Looked After Children (LAC) achieved 5 A\*-CEM, compared to 9.8%. In terms of special needs, of statemented children, 17.3% achieved 5 A\*-CEM, compared to 8.5% nationally and of those with special needs (but have not been statemented), 34.8% achieved 5 A\*-CEM, compared to 24.7%. Finally, secondary attendance reached a record high in 2011/12 of 94.3%, above both the London and national rates; and quite remarkably, by the spring of 2013, every maintained secondary school in Tower Hamlets had been judged either Good or Outstanding by Ofsted (with seven out of 15 ranked as Outstanding: over twice the national average percentage). All Tower Hamlets special schools are also Good or Outstanding (four secondary and two primary) with the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) also judged as Good.

Tower Hamlets' primary schools continued to exceed national averages at Key Stage 2 and by 2011 76.5% of pupils achieved at least level 4 compared to 74% nationally in both English and maths (the attainment gap is 5 points for FSM pupils compared to 20 nationally); 83% achieved level 4 in English and 80.7% achieved level 4 in maths, all above national averages with very high progress figures. By 2012 level 4 and above attainment in English was up 6 percentage points to 89%, maths up 5 points to 86% and English and maths combined up

<sup>2</sup> In addition, it is noted by Hargreaves and Shirley, (2009: 64) that: 'on standardised achievement tests, GCSE examination results, and rates of students going to university, the Borough ranks as the most improved Local Authority in Britain'

6 points to 82% (exceeding both London and national averages): 35% of children were achieving level 5 in English and 35% in maths. Achievement for LAC was also impressive, with 55% achieving level 4 in 2011 compared to 40% nationally. Not only this but the gap between the percentage of LAC attending school and their peers was closing. For those with special educational needs 12% of those with a statement achieved level 4 compared to 15% nationally, and 48% of those with special educational needs but without a statement achieved level 4 compared to 38% nationally. In addition, primary attendance was 94.8%, a new record high for the Borough, just above the London average and just below the national average of 95%. Moreover, there is currently no school below the floor standard of 60% in combined English and maths and the percentage of Good and Outstanding schools is 83.6% (putting Tower Hamlets primary schools in the top third of local authorities).

## 2.5 Summary

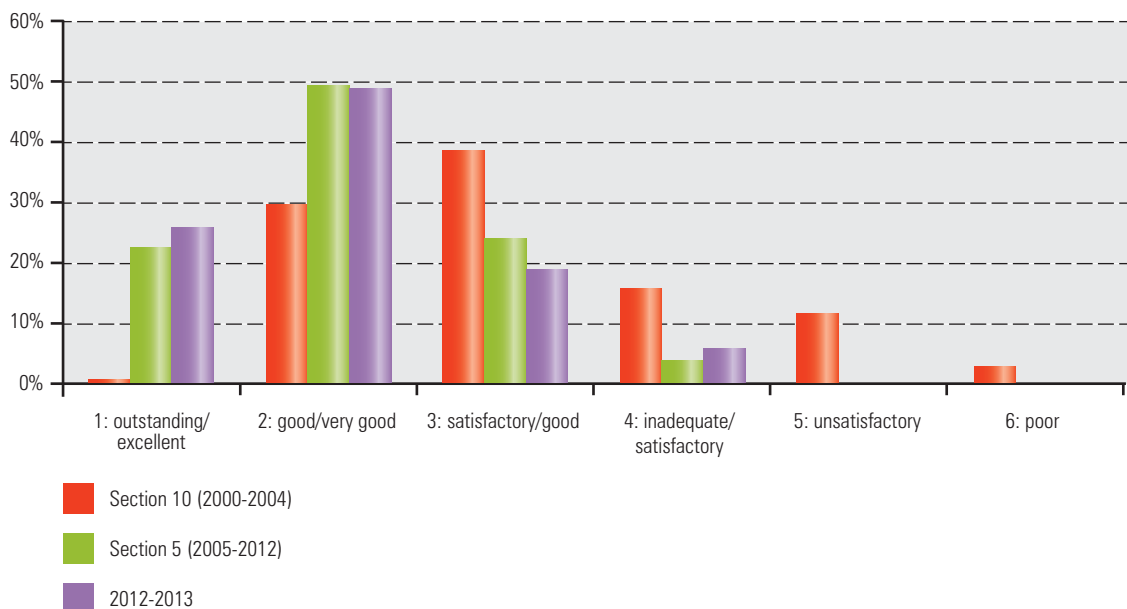
Since the damning Ofsted report of 1998, attainment and achievement have been transformed in Tower Hamlets despite significant socio-economic deprivation. The rate and pace of improvement has been particularly impressive. For example since the introduction of the 5 A\*-CEM measure into the performance tables in 2006, Tower Hamlets secondary schools have gained 25.3 percentage points in six years from 36.5% to 61.8% as against a national rate of improvement of 45.6% in 2006 to 59.4% in 2012 (14.2 points). Similarly at Key Stage 2 Tower Hamlets' primary schools have improved at rates in line with and better than nationally, particularly in writing from 64% in 2006 to 85% in 2012, gaining 21 points compared with a 15-point improvement nationally.<sup>3</sup>

A further indication of success is the trend in Ofsted school inspection reports. Examining overall effectiveness, for example, shows that whilst only 31% of schools in Tower Hamlets were achieving grades 1 and 2 between 2000 and 2004, this had risen to 100% for secondary schools and special schools and 83.6% for primary schools between 2005 and 2013. The very significant improvements in Tower Hamlets' schools and the outcomes for its pupils are compelling evidence that disadvantaged pupils can achieve consistently well. A recent Ofsted report, *'Unseen Children; Access and Achievement 20 years on'* (2013) pointed out that the performance of disadvantaged pupils varies greatly across different local authorities but that Tower Hamlets was in the top four of all LAs in the country, having the smallest attainment gap between FSM pupils and

<sup>3</sup> Provisional results 2013 5 A\*-C EM 65.3%. KS2 English GPS L4+ 79% L5+54% Mathematics L4+ 88% L5+ 6%

the rest at Key Stage 2. Furthermore the attainment of pupils from low income backgrounds at GCSE at Tower Hamlets was above the national figure for all pupils – one of only 3 LAs to achieve this distinction. Not only have schools in Tower Hamlets raised attainment well above national averages, they have also closed the gaps between the performance of groups of pupils. Another recent analysis by Tim Leunig and Gill Wyness examining *'The Tail'*, those who do badly at school in England taking into account such factors as affluence and ethnicity, finds that the best performing authority is Tower Hamlets. They comment that 'since Tower Hamlets represents current best practice we can calculate how much better children in other areas would do were they to attend schools that are as effective as those in Tower Hamlets ... the number would fall by 73,000 to just 30,000 – a remarkable outcome'.<sup>4</sup>

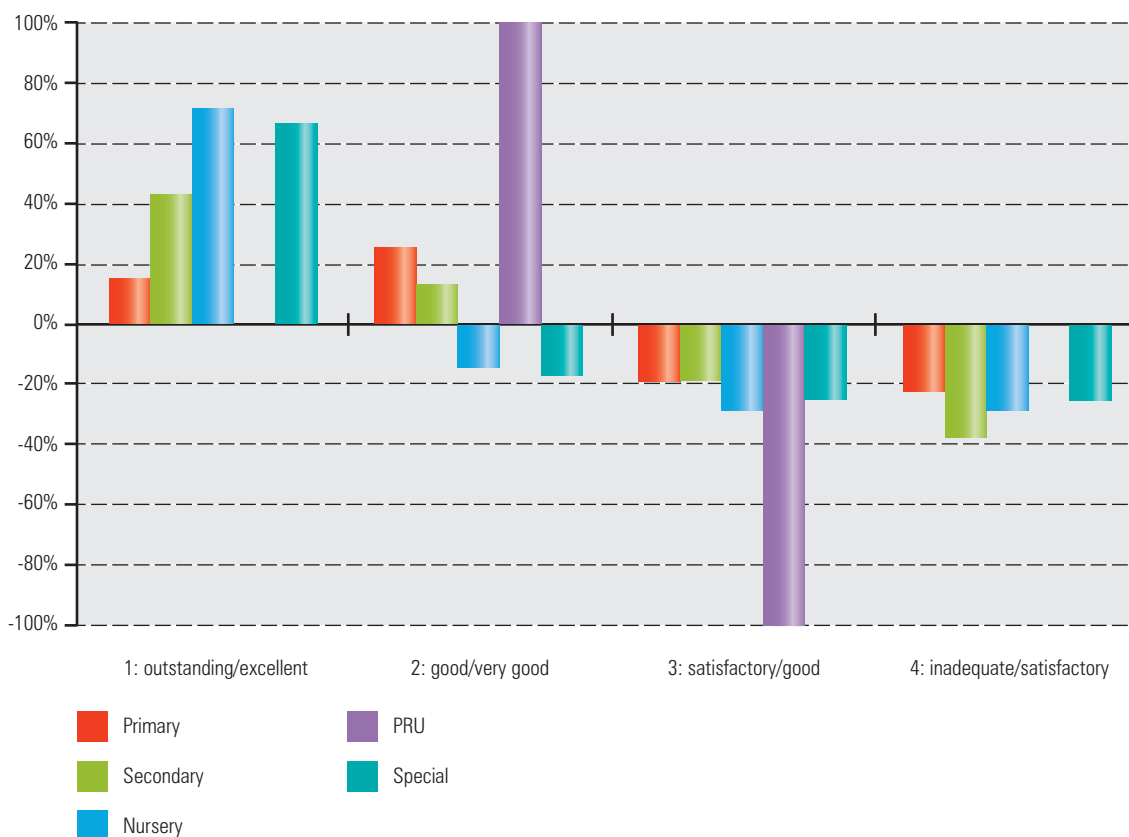
**Graph 1: Overall effectiveness (all schools): 2000-2013**



<sup>4</sup> TOWIE: 'The answer to regional inequality' in *The Tail*, (2013) Ed Marshall, P

Not only this but, as Graph 2 shows, performance has increased across phase, with the biggest improvements being demonstrated by PRUs:

**Graph 2: Percentage point change in overall effectiveness (by phase): 2000-2013**



We will now explore the factors behind this remarkable transformation which demonstrates conclusively that deprivation is not destiny and that a Local Authority with its schools, backed by a range of partners, can dramatically improve the life chances of its children and young people.



## 3 Our approach

Our analysis is based on interview and documentary data from Tower Hamlets officials, on inspection and review reports and on published external work on the Borough. The core of the data is drawn from routine monitoring and business files held by the Local Authority, which enabled us to trace the chronology of transformation. The documentary data included:

- Examining minutes from the Borough's Learning, Achievement and Leisure Scrutiny Panel; copies of the Tower Hamlets Council Strategic Plans; copies of the Borough's Educational Achievements and Progress briefings.
- Scrutinizing Ofsted reports, in particular the Annual Performance Assessment[s] of Services for Children and Young People and their Inspection[s] of Tower Hamlets Local Education Authority.
- Scrutinizing school Ofsted data and reports from the period 1998-2013.

This extensive documentary data set was supplemented by interview and question data. Extended interviews were conducted with two former Tower Hamlets Directors of Education and/or Children's Services (Christine Gilbert and Kevan Collins), who were serving during the 1997 to 2012 period, and interviews with five serving LA senior staff who have been in post since at least 1997 together with an education consultant who has worked with the Authority over this period. A questionnaire was distributed to all Tower Hamlets Headteachers in Autumn 2012, seeking in-depth answers to open questions, such as: 'what do you think Tower Hamlets Local Authority has contributed to your school's success?' In order to develop a better understanding of school level practices, case study interviews were undertaken with five Headteachers within Tower Hamlets and other documents including school Ofsted reports related to their school were examined. Of these five schools, three were primary schools, one was a secondary school and one was an all-through special school.

This approach has led us to develop seven explanatory themes that we believe have driven the change and improvement witnessed within the Borough. These are:

- Ambitious leadership at all levels
- Very effective school improvement
- High quality teaching and learning
- High levels of funding
- External integrated services
- Community development and partnerships
- A resilient approach to external government policies and pressure.

These themes are now explored in detail, but it is also important to stress – as we do in the final section of this report – that the themes interacted and interlocked throughout the period of transformative change.

## 4

## 4 Transforming education for all: seven key themes

Drawing on this data, we have isolated seven 'key themes' which appear to underpin the transformation of the Local Authority. Although we now discuss these in turn, it will soon become clear that some underlying ideas recur, and there are inter-connections between the themes.

### 4.1 Theme 1: ambitious leadership at all levels

*'Leadership for transformation is the art of accomplishing more than the science of management says is possible' – Colin Powell*

#### **LEA leadership**

Tower Hamlets became an education authority in 1990, following the abolition of the Inner London Education Authority. It assumed its education responsibilities just as a corporate reorganisation of the Council itself took effect, delegating decision making and service delivery to seven neighbourhoods, a reorganisation which was said in the 1998 Ofsted report to have been a 'disaster' (Ofsted 1998: 11). Between 1990 and 1997 costs spiralled, the Authority became concerned with securing adequate numbers of school places in the face of a serious deficit and then, between 1994 and 1997, 'came largely to a standstill. The work of individual services was not given impetus and focus by clear leadership from the centre' (Ofsted, 1998: 13). Despite this, the damning report ended with a note of optimism: the LEA understood the scale of the challenge and had appointed a new Director of Education, who had already put a new education development plan out for consultation.

Hargreaves and Harris note of Christine Gilbert: 'she left her job in a leafy suburb to move to Tower Hamlets – then the worst-performing Local Authority in England – to become its Director of Education. Leaders who perform beyond expectations deliberately seek out acute challenges and exceptional crises. They move towards the danger' (2012: 7). Ofsted (1998: 6) remark that: 'she [Gilbert] is unequivocal about the need to raise standards urgently, and has won the enthusiastic assent of Headteachers to a more challenging and ambitious approach'. Collins, one of Gilbert's successors, says it is: "Impossible to overstate her achievement". Gilbert herself describes the initial Ofsted report as, if anything too positive: "We were lucky not to be outsourced." The report was "terrifically useful", especially with Members. Gilbert set about implementing a challenging Strategic Plan for the LEA (for the period 1998-2002): Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) argue that Gilbert combined 'visionary' leadership with a

concomitant strategy to raise performance by establishing goals (within this plan) that were deliberately designed to be just out of reach. The idea here was to take staff out of their comfort zone and motivate them to extend their capability (Hargreaves and Harris, 2012). Hargreaves and Shirley note that this strategy rested on the philosophy that ‘it is better to have ambitious targets and just miss them than have more modest targets and meet them’ (2009: 67). Recognising these efforts, Ofsted (2000: 4) attributed much of the initial improvement in Tower Hamlets’ performance to Gilbert: ‘Much of the LEA’s success in implementing the recommendations and improving its support to schools can be attributed to the high quality of leadership shown by the director and senior officers. Headteachers, Governors and Members all expressed their confidence in the management of the LEA’. Staff serving under Gilbert too were enthusiastic: “Christine led from the front, there were no excuses, only challenges to be overcome.” (TH official 1) Gilbert herself remembers that the plan allowed her to capture the ambitions of Members and “to have a row with schools ... once you have a plan and knew what you wanted to achieve, more falls in”.

Kevan Collins took up his post as the first Director of Children’s Services (DCS) in Tower Hamlets in 2005, being promoted to Chief Executive four and a half years later. At the time when Collins was DCS, Gilbert had been appointed Chief Executive. His initial assessment was that primary schools had already closed the gap “dramatically” but that secondaries were still lagging with GCSE performance across the Borough at 30%. For Gilbert, this is a literacy challenge: the secondaries, although improving after 1998, needed to see primary improvements in literacy feed through so that the secondaries could, as Collins puts it, “turn properly” in English and maths achievement. He argues that after 2005 with primary performance the need for the LA was to “turn the screw”, sending bespoke analytical letters about primary results, intervening strongly to agree programmes of work needed in Year 6 to secure targets and “establishing the rhythm” of expectations at the time when the national strategies were stepping back.

### ***Focusing and monitoring results and use of personal insights***

Central to Tower Hamlets’ new approach was a focus on results and on monitoring authentic progress towards them (Hargreaves and Harris, 2012). For example early on at Key Stage 1, the target was for 80% of pupils to reach level 2 or higher by 2002; at Key Stage 2, for 70% of pupils to reach level 4 in English and science and 73% to reach level 4 in maths. The target at Key Stage 4, meanwhile, was for 40% of pupils to achieve GCSEs at grades A\*-C, while other key metrics included attendance and extended leave (a particular problem in

Tower Hamlets due to the ethnic and religious make-up of its population). Annual reports were employed in order to provide a snapshot of progress over the length of each strategic plan. In order to maintain progress, where targets were met they were subsequently revised upwards; when the Borough was in danger of missing them additional support was provided.

In addition however, the Borough developed an in-depth knowledge both of its schools and the communities they serve. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) note that the Borough built trust with its schools and developed a personal knowledge and insight of what was happening (more so than could be gleaned simply from performance spreadsheets). There were important significant early changes: not only was the Advisory Service restructured and brought closer to schools but Christine Gilbert insisted on a separation between inspection and support. In Harrow, Gilbert had been used to such a separation, but in Tower Hamlets in the mid 1990s, the Advisory Service was both “an arm of Ofsted and the school improvement service”. At this stage, the Advisory Service was “never quite as bad as the schools thought but it was beyond repair”. Ofsted (2000) suggest that a key feature of the LEA’s leadership was the development of effective working partnerships with schools, but these were based on tough decisions. Officers, headteachers and advisers were trained in a rigorous and systematic way particularly with regard to target setting.

### ***Political leadership: the Council***

The achievement of Tower Hamlets is not in securing improvement in some schools, but in raising achievement across all its schools – in 2013 all of its secondary schools are Good or Outstanding. Gilbert is clear that the politicians were “ambitious for education from the day I was appointed”: she describes herself as “not a natural appointment” but an appointment with strong ambitions. The challenge for the Council in 1998 was that despite their high ambitions, they lacked the support and guidance to translate those ambitions into practice. What happened after 1998 was that effective professional and political leadership worked together to translate the high ambitions elected Members had into achievable and practical strategies for improvement. On the evidence we have received, the challenge was not in securing high ambitions for Tower Hamlets schools, but winning the belief of schools that significant improvement was possible to lift the sights of schools. The key steps here were to secure buy-in from political leaders, Headteachers and the community to a set of shared goals and stretching targets.



In 1998 and 1999, hugely rapid progress was being made: Christine Gilbert says that once success started politicians became yet more enthused. For her, the important cultural shifts in 1998 and 1999 were in schools and amongst officers: the elected Members were always ambitious but did not at that stage know how to translate ambitions into practice.

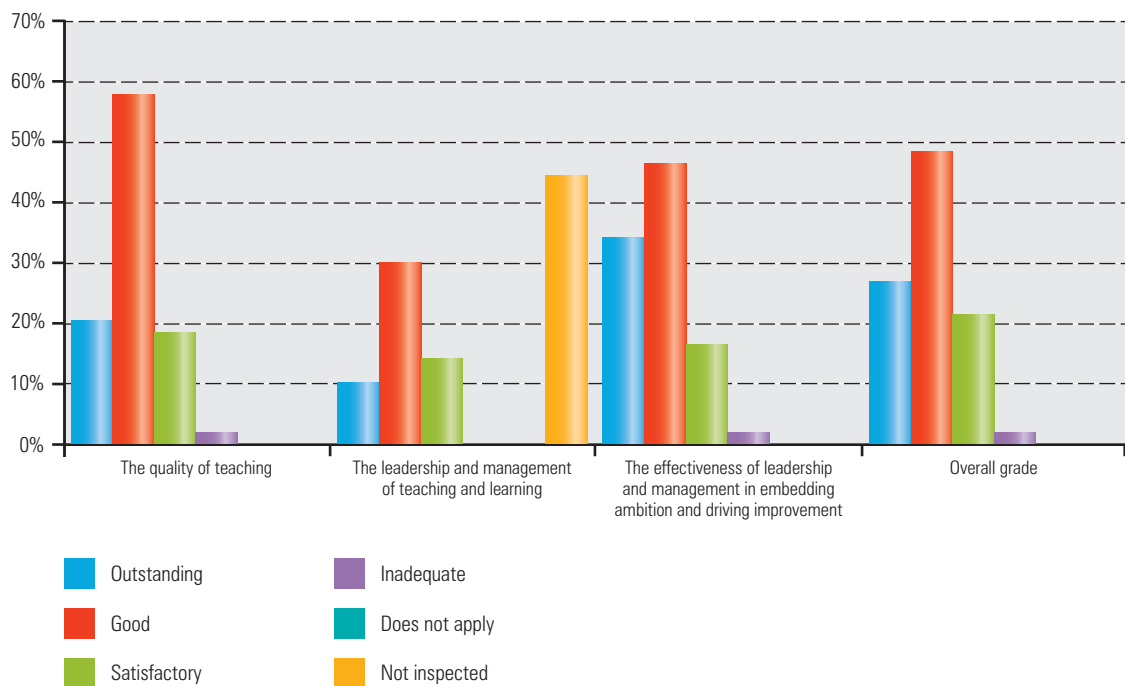
Collins locates the political impetus for change in Tower Hamlets as being deep rooted: he cites the election of a BNP Councillor in 1994 as a dynamic for political cohesion, drawing Bengali Councillors into politics in the following election when the BNP were defeated, and drawing in Councillors with strong ambitions for education. There was a “collective responsibility” across the Borough which made it possible to mobilise resource and enthusiasm for change. For him, there were deep commitments to education in the community and the task of the professionals was to “get the culture right and the offer right” so that the community could realise its aspirations. For him, the location of Tower Hamlets “on the edge of the City”, with the “inheritance of the East End” creates a strong mentality of place, and once professional leadership was properly aligned with political leadership there was a strong determination to “show the rest of the world what we can achieve ... Poverty became a spur to ambition, not an excuse”.

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**School leadership**

School leadership is vital to school improvement, as Leithwood and Seashore Louis note: 'to date we have not found a single documented case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership' (2012: 3). For Tower Hamlets, this is verified by examining the Ofsted performance data for 2005 to 2012, which suggests that the overall effectiveness of schools within the Borough is highly correlated to the effectiveness of its school leaders and management in embedding their ambition to drive improvement ( $r^2 = 0.912$ ); similarly, outcomes for individuals and groups of children within Tower Hamlets appears to be strongly correlated to the effectiveness of the leadership of its schools and the management of teaching and learning ( $r^2 = 0.999$ ). Over time, Ofsted inspections have seen a steady improvement in the grading awarded for the leadership of teaching and learning. The current position (taken from the most recent Ofsted inspections) is as follows:

**Graph 3: Inspection grades for teaching and the leadership of teaching in Tower Hamlets schools up to June 30, 2012**



**Table 1: Primary Inspection grades for teaching and the leadership of teaching in Tower Hamlets schools up to June 30, 2012**

Grade descriptors	The quality of teaching	The leadership and management of teaching and learning	The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	Overall grade
Outstanding	18%	15%	24%	4%
Good	54%	59%	51%	28%
Satisfactory	25%	24%	22%	19%
Inadequate	3%	3%	3%	0%
Does not apply	0%	0%	0%	0%
Not inspected	0%	0%	0%	49%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

**Table 2: Secondary Inspection grades for teaching and the leadership of teaching in Tower Hamlets schools up to June 30, 2012**

Grade descriptors	The quality of teaching	The leadership and management of teaching and learning	The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	Overall grade
Outstanding	40%	13%	60%	13%
Good	33%	73%	33%	53%
Satisfactory	27%	13%	7%	7%
Inadequate	0%	0%	0%	0%
Does not apply	0%	0%	0%	0%
Not inspected	0%	0%	0%	27%
	100%	100%	100%	100%



From 1998 Tower Hamlets invested heavily in promoting leadership development programmes. All new heads to the Borough joined a two year programme and this soon developed into a common leadership programme for all new and serving heads. This was supplemented by programmes for deputies and middle leaders. These programmes were provided by expert consultants along with individual coaching and mentoring.

What has been important over the period are those practices of school leaders that have led to such considerable improvement. The responses to questioning and case studies data, together with Ofsted evidence, suggests that leaders of Good and Outstanding schools maintained a consistent focus and commitment with regard to their goals, priorities and mission to raise standards whilst ensuring that teaching and learning consistently excelled in application. As one Head put it, “Things have to be implemented in a consistent way, they cannot be demoted or watered down – consistency is part of the concerted effort and ensures things are done right and well”. Another Head referred to “The importance of the whole school being aware of the priorities that are being worked towards to share and to thrive for those retaining focus until these are met”. One Head had directed the efforts of the whole school towards improving literacy: “Everyone should be flat out and targeted at this goal”. Leaders also appeared to be very much focused upon rigorous monitoring and evaluation as a basis for improvement, for example ‘there are very strong systems to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of provision so that leaders and managers are fully aware of strengths and weaknesses and can plan better for improvement’, and ‘priorities are driven by what the data suggests – sustained effort is then placed upon these priorities’. (Ofsted)

A particular strong feature to drive school improvement has been the emphasis put upon the collection, dissemination and analysis of assessment data provided by the school and the Local Authority, followed by established processes to enable staff to take action on the basis of this data to meet the needs of all pupils. ‘Assessment data is used well to target high-quality additional support’, ‘the careful tracking of the attainment and progress of groups and individual pupils is a strong feature’, and ‘the attention to detail and knowledge of individual pupils’, are typical comments from Ofsted on this aspect.

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From reading a selection of Ofsted inspection reports on Tower Hamlets' schools related to leadership and management it would appear that they share some common characteristics:

- They have consistent, high expectations and are very ambitious for the success of their pupils.
- They constantly demonstrate that disadvantage need not be a barrier to achievement.
- They focus relentlessly on improving teaching and learning with very effective professional development of all staff.
- They are expert at assessment and the tracking of pupil progress with appropriate support and intervention based upon a detailed knowledge of individual pupils.
- They are highly inclusive, having complete regard for the progress and personal development of every pupil.
- They develop individual students through promoting rich opportunities for learning both within and out of the classroom.
- They cultivate a range of partnerships particularly with parents, business and the community to support pupil learning and progress.
- They are robust and rigorous in terms of self-evaluation and data analysis with clear strategies for improvement.

## 4.2 Theme 2: very effective school improvement

*'The greatest danger is not that our aim is too high – but that it is too low and we reach it' – Michelangelo*

The Ofsted report of 1998 was critical of the performance of schools and the Inspection and Advisory Service. It reported that the service was poorly regarded by schools with an over emphasis on monitoring and inconsistent levels of support. By 2000 Ofsted noted that a radically re-structured advisory service had been put into place with clear strategies for supporting and developing schools but also monitoring and intervention where required. In this period the number of schools in Special Measures and Serious Weaknesses was a major concern to the LA and challenging targets were set to reduce this number. Over the next few years schools were graded and those causing concern were monitored and reviewed very closely with appropriate support as required. Furthermore, every opportunity was taken to adopt and purposely implement the very best practice. For the primary schools the highly focused implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategies was paramount and for all schools leadership was under particular scrutiny. Where Headteachers and Governors were found wanting the Authority took decisive action such as suspending delegation or insisting on a change of school leadership. Indeed the data demonstrates that between 1998 and 2012 out of 48 schools causing concern or in Ofsted categories 42 heads were replaced. Crucially the Director of Children's Services and senior officers have been closely involved with the appointment of new Headteachers and have not hesitated to use their powers to prevent an appointment where they thought the Governors' recommendation was inappropriate. Certainly the high quality of Headteacher leadership as evident through Ofsted inspections has been a major factor in the rapid improvement of Tower Hamlets' schools. Interviews with Tower Hamlets officers suggest that the LA concentrated a lot of effort and resource into school improvement – both human and financial. They characterise the work done with schools over the years as 'rigorous', 'robust' and 'relentless' in pursuit of improvement both before, through and after the era of School Improvement Partners which were carefully selected by the Authority. In such a small borough, with fewer than 100 schools, the Authority knows its schools very well and has established a range of consultative forums to make sure that policies and support and challenge programmes are explained and that the views of heads and other stakeholders can be taken into account. As well as input through the school improvement service directly there are a range of officers who have everyday dealings with schools related to particular services

and partnerships such as attendance, behaviour, special needs and social inclusion. The shared intelligence about schools enables the Authority to support where it is required and challenge appropriately. Interviews and evidence from Headteachers also indicates that there are generally positive relationships with the Local Authority and its schools, despite some cutbacks, are still able to access a range of support services to support them in their endeavours to improve on their previous best performance. Over the last few years, as we relate elsewhere, schools in Ofsted categories have been reduced to a handful and the challenge has been to develop many more Good and Outstanding schools with very impressive results.

School improvement services in Tower Hamlets in partnership with schools have been able to add value through:

- Leadership, shared beliefs and values and reinforcing a common language of improvement characterised as ‘pushing forward and standing behind’, with high aspirations and expectations.
- Building partnerships, trust and capacity with school leaders but also with a wide range of partnerships including informed partnerships with parents, community groups and Governors.
- A relentless press to raise standards both in school performance and local services working within a culture of clear planning, targets and benchmarking performance.
- Gathering, disseminating and using performance data, Tower Hamlets’ schools have been well served by their Research and Statistics Department which has provided a sophisticated range of contextual and benchmarked data to complement DfE and Ofsted data.
- Monitoring, challenging, reviewing, supporting and intervening in schools relative to performance.
- Supporting teaching and learning, leadership and management through continuous professional development. In part this has been done through the work of the Professional Development Centre and specialist consultants as well as advisers but sometimes through the brokerage and commissioning of expert services and the dissemination of best practice.

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Of course the drive for school improvement on the ground has been led by school leaders and staff in individual schools and we refer to this more specially under the themes of ambitious school leadership and high quality teaching and learning. Determined and resilient leadership along with high expectations has built a sustained momentum for improvement. Expert data analysis, benchmarked against other local and similar schools, has provided the impetus for ambitious target setting. Where these targets were met and even exceeded it provided the springboard for even more success. Where targets weren't met at first schools were quick to put into place a range of interventions personalising support for individual and groups of children and young people. Opportunities for after school and out of hours learning are considerable in Tower Hamlets, providing a further boost for attainment and achievement. Over time a spirit of 'collaborative competition' seems to have developed with success in some schools spurring on other schools to do just as well. Schools have also been encouraged to work together and at the moment there are two Teaching School Alliances. It has been suggested that schools and school leaders within the Borough worked together 'with an additional twist of friendly rivalry in order to promote the greater good of their communities'. (Hargreaves and Harris, 2012) This has ensured that schools are used to engaging in both transition and cross-school collaboration and have also developed the capacity to support neighbouring schools who may be struggling.



### 4.3 Theme 3: high quality teaching and learning

*'The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers' – Michael Barber*

#### ***Improving teaching***

As with school leadership, examining the Ofsted data for 2005-2012 indicates that the overall effectiveness of schools is highly correlated to the quality of teaching ( $r^2 = 0.926$ ). Again, the most current position in terms of Ofsted grading of teaching and learning can be seen in Graph 3 (page 23). The Borough experienced a massive teacher shortage in the mid 1990s with the result that teachers were taken from other Boroughs or recruited from abroad. Successfully reversing this position and attracting and retaining high quality teachers is cited as a major feature of Tower Hamlets' approach to improving its educational performance (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009). Little detail is provided in the current literature, however, as to what, if any, specific measures were taken to address this issue. Some detail, though, is provided in the minutes of the Borough's Learning, Achievement and Leisure Scrutiny Panel (for Monday September 30, 2002). Here the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Manager for Tower Hamlets LA is recorded discussing Tower Hamlets' recruitment and retention strategy and a number of initiatives within this. The specific initiatives covered by the strategy include: i) recruiting and retaining high quality staff; ii) encouraging and supporting local people into education and maximising work-based routes to qualified teacher status; iii) improving the recruitment of newly qualified teachers; iv) improving access to housing for teachers; and v) professional development of teachers.

Minutes of the Panel meeting include the following recorded points in relation to the above:

[the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Manager for Tower Hamlets] explained that the Education Directorate placed a very high priority on the recruitment and retention of high quality teachers in order to ensure that recent improvements in education standards across the Borough were not jeopardised by the ... teacher shortage [of the time].

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Of particular note was the desire of the Education Directorate to find out what attracted people to Tower Hamlets, what encouraged them into teaching and what persuaded them to stay in the Borough. In addition the Borough's recruitment and retention strategy was developed and executed in consultation with "headteachers, governors, trades unions, the Teacher Training Agency, the DfES and with colleagues in other boroughs to assess the nature and scale of the problem and redefine its strategy". As a result "a number of initiatives had been introduced to promote the Borough as a first class teaching environment and facilitate high quality, stable staffing". Importantly [the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Manager] added that these developments were "particularly important as there was no evidence to suggest the national initiatives were having a significant effect in improving teacher recruitment and retention in inner London".

As a result, over subsequent years Tower Hamlets has pursued efforts in relation to five key issues: to recruiting and retaining high quality staff; to encouraging and supporting local people into education by developing work-based routes into teaching; to improving the recruitment and retention of newly qualified teachers; by improving access to housing for teachers and by developing the professional learning of serving teachers.

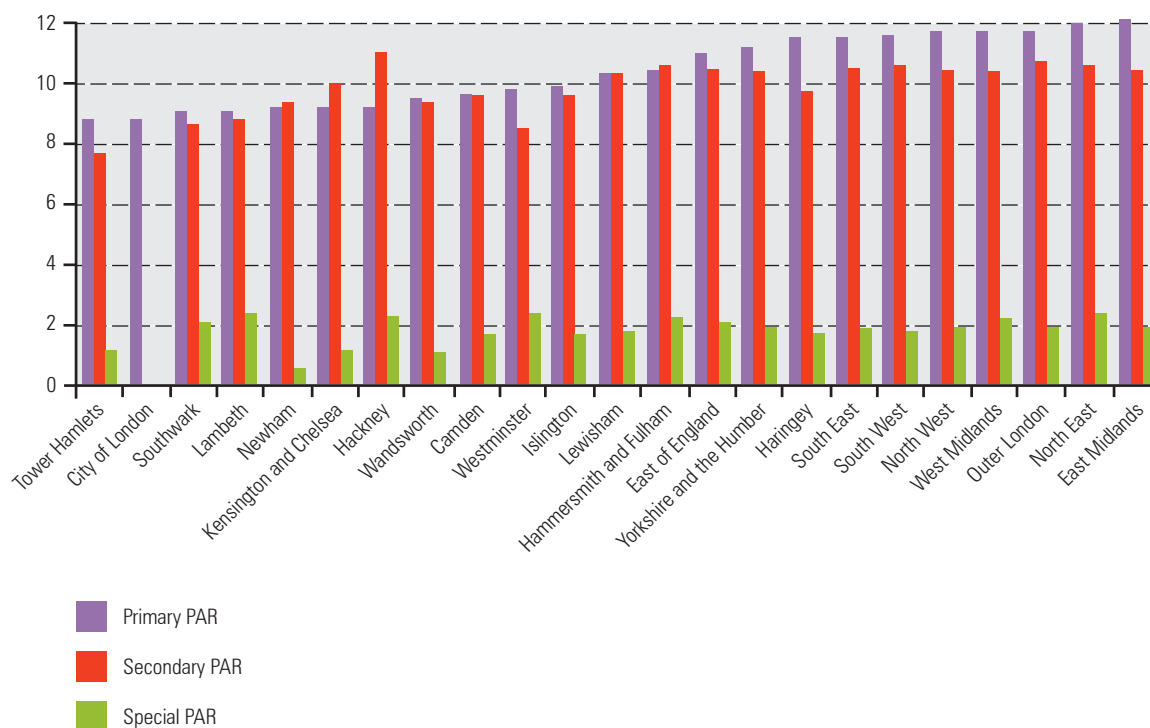
The recruitment and retention of high quality staff is at the core of educational transformation, and the Tower Hamlets leadership realised that a positive effort was needed not only to counteract the negative publicity which might flow from working in one of the most challenging and lowest performing of local authorities, but also to build an esprit de corps around teaching in, and driving change for, children in Tower Hamlets. Extensive work was done on stressing the positive advantages of working in Tower Hamlets – of being part of radical change, so that working in and for Tower Hamlets was 'the place to be' for those committed to urban education. Strong positive publicity was accompanied by attraction and retention packages at all levels – for Headteachers, middle leaders and, as we shall see, for newly qualified and trainee teachers. Such attractive packages often carried a requirement to stay in the Borough for at least a defined period as a condition of accepting the packages, and they were underpinned by a high quality continuing professional development offer, again at all levels, and, for ambitious and successful teachers, an explicit commitment to career development and to promotion from within including a big Advanced Skills Teacher programme. The Authority ran a Masters programme in close partnership with a university, and, while many councils were closing theirs, kept a Professional Development Centre.

Intensive work was done on the recruitment of newly qualified teachers. Collins did not believe that this had ever been a coherent strategy: the Authority was clear that there was a collective responsibility to recruit and retain the best, with strong links to university providers and early participation in Teach First. Teachers came to see that Tower Hamlets was a good place to start a career: they knew that there was intensive support and that teachers who ran into difficulties would not be left on their own. Tower Hamlets had undertaken extensive work on housing schemes – necessary given housing costs in central London – but the LA is no longer able to maintain a recruitment officer or to offer preferred housing options. Less high profile, but just as important in building strong community cohesion was the intensive work which Tower Hamlets did on encouraging and supporting local people into education roles. There was a strong link with the LA's equalities strategy, which was building routes which drew local residents into roles as teaching assistants, learning mentors, parent support advisers and then using these roles as the basis for work-based routes into teaching.

#### ***The wider workforce***

Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) argue that workforce remodelling has also had an instrumental role to play in reviving Tower Hamlets' fortunes. Whilst this has been essential in reducing the Borough's Pupil Adult Ratio (which is now the lowest in the country: see Graph 4 on next page), as noted above, it also means that many of the adults within Tower Hamlets' classrooms come from within the Borough itself and so are able to well understand and respond to the contextual nuances of the pupils they help teach. As one interviewee noted, "teachers couldn't always communicate with the Bangladeshi kids ... we started bringing in the mums, teaching them English and providing them with literacy and numeracy skills and making them TAs" (TH official 1). In addition, many of these teaching assistants go on to train as teachers, meaning that this route has provided an effective route for schools to 'grow their own'.



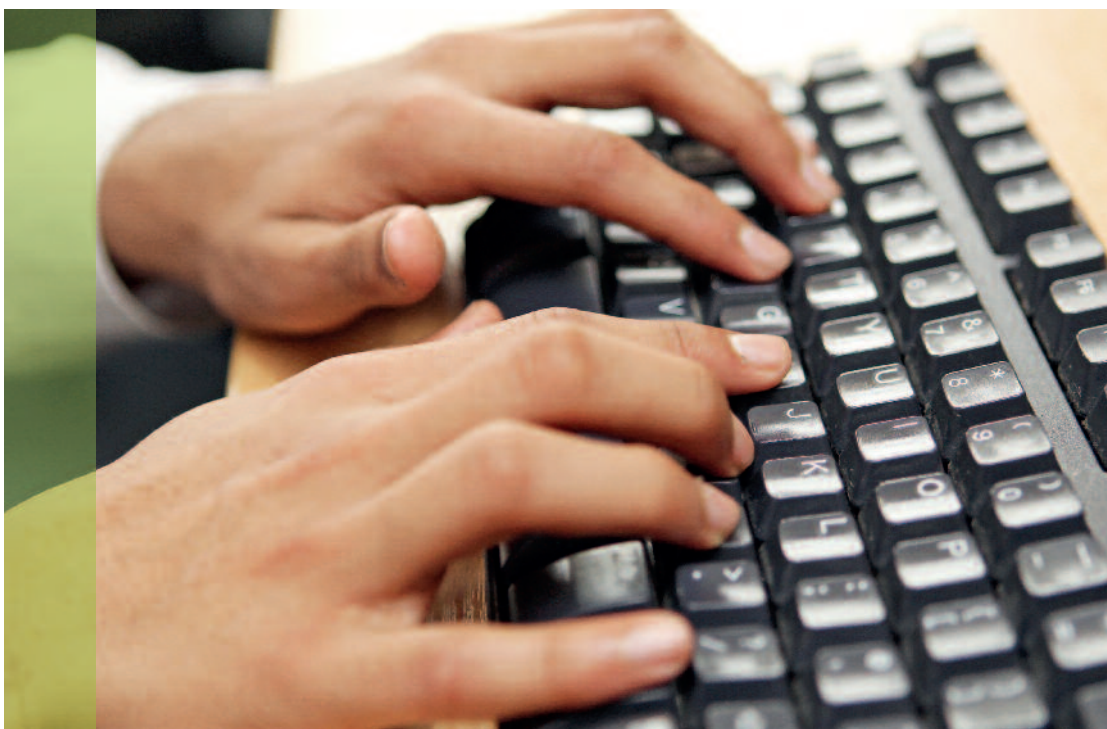
**Graph 4: Pupil Adult Ratios by region (DfE: 2010)**

It has always been the Education Directorate's intention to improve recruitment to, and participation in, initial teacher training initiatives within the Borough and its travel to work area, particularly from members of ethnic communities and in sympathy with a 'workforce to reflect the community'. In the last decade the Council had developed an extensive programme with special courses for training teaching assistants. The ultimate aim was to develop a clear progression route into teaching for these staff, the vast majority of whom were local people. By providing professional development opportunities at all levels, those who lacked qualifications or confidence could be offered a range of options, which might lead them to a career in teaching eventually.

Ofsted data and reports comment on high quality teaching and learning across Tower Hamlets' schools. This is in part a reflection of very effective school leadership previously referred to with a relentless focus on teaching and learning and rigorous assessment systems leading to bespoke support and intervention to maximise the progress and achievement for all pupils. It also reflects the considerable efforts, expertise and high expectations of all teachers and support staff in planning and implementing learning activities as well as marking,

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assessment and feedback. Typical comments in inspection reports refer to 'high quality teaching that engages and includes all pupils', 'teachers and other adults creating a positive climate for learning', 'teaching staff have considerable high expectations of all pupils', and 'pupils have personalised programmes of support in their learning, the impact of which is monitored and altered as necessary'. There are other references too to quality professional development programmes and systems and the development of professional learning communities. As we remark earlier in this section the recruitment, retention and professional development of high quality staff is at the core of school improvement and educational transformation. Most of the teaching and learning in Tower Hamlets is Good and Outstanding and as a result pupils make rapid and sustained progress.

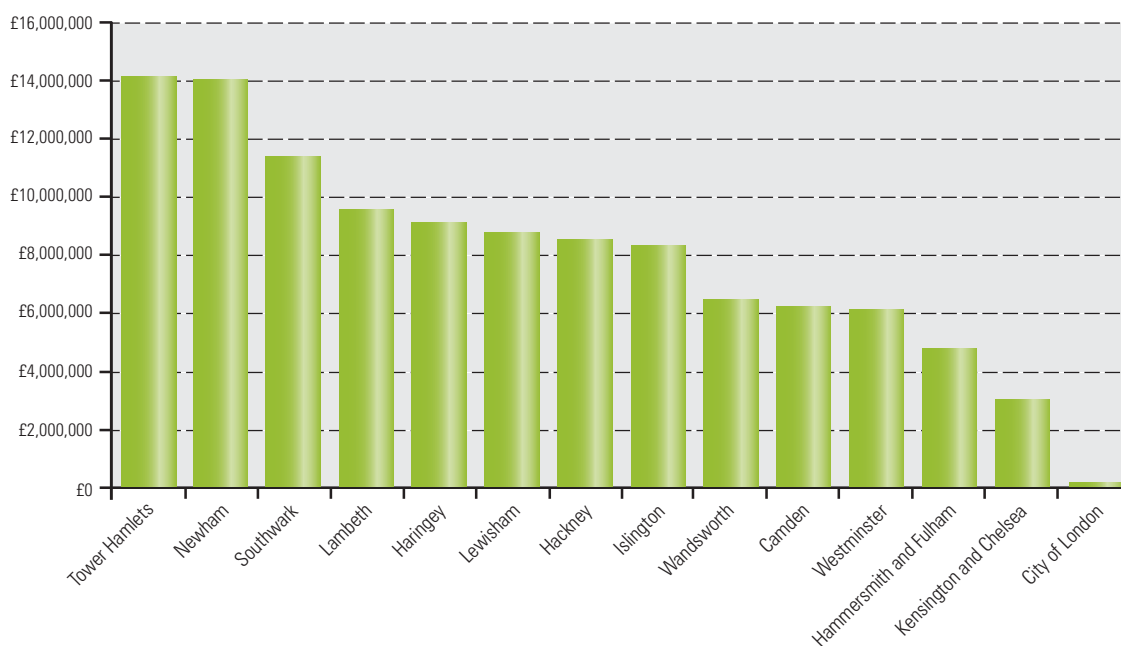


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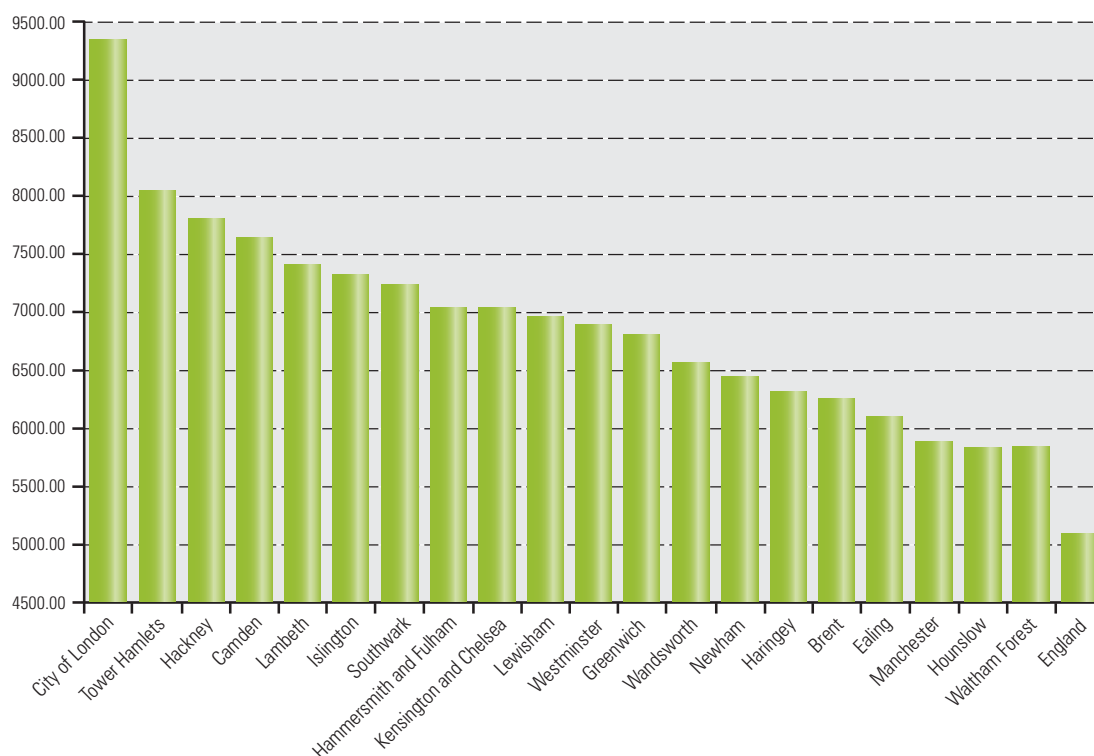
#### 4.4 Theme 4: high levels of funding

No account of the education transformation in Tower Hamlets can overlook resource. As Graphs 5 and 6 below set out, schools in Tower Hamlets were well-resourced, with almost 60% more resource per pupil than schools across England and higher levels of resourcing than almost all other London boroughs. Many of those we spoke to at different levels of the Authority commented on resourcing. Christine Gilbert contrasted Tower Hamlets with her experience as Director of Education in Harrow, where money was always tight. One Headteacher, appointed from outside the Authority, said that “the very high levels of funding [within Tower Hamlets] are in marked contrast to my experience outside of the Borough”; and another remarked that “budgets are huge compared to anywhere else I have worked”. Moreover, as schools in Tower Hamlets improved, so the Council became yet more willing to invest in education: improvement drew in more resource. So it could be argued that the transformation of schooling in Tower Hamlets is simply a consequence of high levels of resource.

**Graph 5: Total allocation for the Pupil Premium (London Boroughs), 2012-13**



**Graph 6: 2012-13 Guaranteed per Pupil Unit of Funding (£)**



But this argument runs into some obvious flaws. If the performance of schools in Tower Hamlets was simply a consequence of levels of funding, the 1998 Ofsted report would never have been written. If the performance of schools in Tower Hamlets was simply a consequence of levels of funding, the Authority would not have recorded exceptionally low levels of examination success in the early 1990s. If the performance of schools in Tower Hamlets was simply a consequence of levels of funding we would still need to explain rapid improvements throughout the first decade of the 21st century. It's undeniable that Tower Hamlets schools were well resourced – far better resourced than schools elsewhere – but money needs to be spent wisely, and survey respondents noted that interventions have to be of “quality”: “It’s easy to look as though you’re doing something by spending money on interventions, but the impact will be limited if the quality of the intervention isn’t good”. What Tower Hamlets began to achieve after 1998 and 1999 was a highly effective return on levels of investment. If the Tower Hamlets story makes a strong case for high levels of education spending, it also makes a case for targeting that spending intelligently, for linking investment with outcomes, for monitoring the impact of

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spending and for building the case for investment. Interview data from sessions held with Borough officials too suggests that buying the most appropriate services has been key, and often schools would “buy-back” from the Authority (TH official 1). For example, schools are able to buy additional teachers from the Borough’s Support for Learning Service (SLS). This enables them to provide additional support to children with Special Educational Needs who do not have a statement with specialist educational plans and additional teaching. Tower Hamlets also benefitted from Building Schools for the Future (BSF) where it was estimated that £300 million (including ICT investment) was pumped into secondary schools to provide ‘world class 21st century facilities [to] transform the educational outcomes of young people, bring schools closer to the community and provide local people with increased opportunities for learning and development’. Even here, budgets – lavish in many respects – were managed tightly, so that BSF projects were delivered to budget and often ahead of time, whilst the Authority, intelligently building on success, chose to focus its community investment on BSF interventions to secure yet more value from central government interventions.

#### 4.5 Theme 5: external, integrated services

*'The best case for public education has always been that it is a common good. Everyone, ultimately, has a stake in the calibre of schools, and education is everyone's business' – Michael Fullan*

From 2006 Children and Young People's Plans were introduced, the first from 2006 to 2009 and the second from 2009 to 2012. The first of these plans was organised around the Every Child Matters priorities for children and young people to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. The Annual Performance assessments of services for children and young people conducted by Ofsted between 2005 and 2008 regularly report that the Council made an outstanding contribution towards improving outcomes in all five areas of its Children and Young People's Plan. The 2006 report, for example, praised the Children and Young People's Plan as having a clear strategic vision, being focused on clear performance indicators and outcomes for pupils within a context of support and challenge. The priorities were firmly rooted in a community planning process which involved all key stakeholders including children and young people. The Authority's use of benchmarking to review performance and to set challenging targets was identified as good practice and the Authority's track record of successful partnership with other agencies identified as a clear strength.

In 2007 the report, meanwhile, stated that 'the authority has a very good understanding of the needs of its communities and targets resources precisely to achieve good outcomes for young people, particularly in relation to their very low starting points. High expectations and an ambition to excel, combined with purposeful and well-judged interventions, succeed in supporting children and young people to overcome significant social and economic barriers'. There were extensive opportunities for young people to influence the shaping of the Council's services as well as to take part in the evaluation of their effectiveness. The 2008 report further commented that 'excellent partnership work ensures a joined up, cohesive, multi-agency approach to service delivery. The determination to overcome considerable social and economic barriers, improve outcomes and to reduce inequalities is shared by all with considerable success'.

The Council's services were often described as making an excellent or outstanding contribution to improving the health of children and young people, particularly vital in such an area of socio-economic deprivation. Joint multi-

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agency strategies were judged to be very effective with a strong emphasis on prevention and detailed needs analysis. By the end of 2007 the Authority had exceeded national targets for achieving Healthy Schools Status and was meeting ambitious local targets with particular praise for services for children with disabilities and the very good performance for the health of LAC. In general there was very effective promotion of healthy lifestyles across a very diverse community. Similarly, during these years the outcomes for the safety and care of children were described as Outstanding with very strong and clear systems for information sharing and cross agency working ensuring that the needs of vulnerable children were being met. The Local Safeguarding Children's Board, operating since March, 2006, had proved to be very effective. In terms of making a positive contribution there was excellent contributions to improving outcomes in this area enhanced by collaborative work with a number of partners including the youth offending team, the police and the voluntary sector. Opportunities for young people to have a say were provided through Local Youth Partnerships, and the Tower Hamlets Youth Partnership and the Youth Parliament. Inspection evidence indicated that young people's contribution to their communities was mostly very good with many young people being trained as peer workers and mentors.

In terms of economic wellbeing the Authority was very successful in making substantial reductions in the number of young people not involved in education, employment or training through targeted, innovative approaches. The proportion of young people achieving level 2 and level 3 qualifications at age 19 was below the national average (2013) but was increasing at a faster rate than nationally with a 26 percentage point rise since 2005 compared to a national rise of approximately 16 points at level 2, and an 18 percentage point rise since 2005 compared to a national rise of approximately 12 points at level 3.

We have referred elsewhere to enjoying and achieving and the sustained improvements in educational outcomes for children and young people at all key stages with standards improving at a much faster rate than nationally. A particular feature was the excellent outcomes for vulnerable children including LAC and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

The Children and Young People's Plan between 2009 and 2012 continued to build on these strengths as seen from the range of school and Council evidence although there was no external inspection. A key priority during these years was to continue to reduce child poverty in the Borough which had been 53% in 2009 (based on the proportion of children living in families in receipt of out of work

benefits or tax credits where their reported income was less than 60% median outcome). This had been reduced from 60.3% in 2006, the best improvement rate in London, but further reductions were challenging given the national economic outlook and welfare reform.

Further impressive outcomes were achieved in these years. There was a sustained reduction in the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training which is currently 4.9%. Young people were encouraged to stay in education through the introduction of the Tower Hamlets Mayor's Education Award, the first of its kind nationally, following the end of the Education Maintenance Allowance in England in 2011. Health outcomes also continued to improve as did those related to staying safe and attendance in schools. These were also the years of accelerated educational attainment with both primary and secondary schools exceeding national averages and closing gaps, although further improvements were still required at the Early Years Foundation stage and for post 16 outcomes.

From 2012 to 2015 there is a new Children and Families Plan building on the successes of previous plans taking into account a changing national policy context. The vision 'is for all children and young people to be safe and healthy, achieve their full potential and be active and responsible citizens and emotionally and economically resilient for their future'.





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When we consider the provision of external, integrated services for children and young people in the period since the low point of 1998 we are struck by the sustained range, quality and impact as evidenced through external inspection reports of the Council's services and its schools and internal scrutiny reports. The features of this very successful provision include:

- Ambitious targets and a determination to overcome social and economic barriers to reduce inequalities and improve outcomes.
- A thorough understanding of the needs of the community based on the intelligent use of data and evidence used to target interventions and resources.
- Excellent partnership work, particularly with schools, ensuring a cohesive and responsive multi-agency approach to service delivery.
- The investment of significant funding in children's services with agreed plans and performance indicators and regular scrutiny.
- The strong engagement of children and young people at all levels in policy, planning and delivery.

#### 4.6 Theme 6: community development and partnerships

*'What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy'*

– John Dewey

##### **Community**

A sense of community – a powerful sense of place and its importance – has always characterised Tower Hamlets. As we have seen, there was a powerful local identity shaped by history and experience. It was a sense of identity forged from the grinding poverty of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and shaped by political radicalism in the inter-war years. We have already quoted Kevan Collins' observation that the election of the UK's first BNP Councillor in the 1990s galvanised the community.

The first Community Plan for Tower Hamlets was launched in May, 2001 and produced by the local strategic partnership including the Council, residents, public service providers, businesses, faith communities and the voluntary and community sector. The five major themes were:

- A better place for living safely
- A better place for living well
- A better place for creating and sharing prosperity
- A better place for learning, achievement and leisure
- A better place for excellent public services.

There were three strands to this partnership – local area partnerships, community plan action groups and a partnership management group. Since that date there has been a range of community plans and action to sustain community participation and community cohesion and for young people to achieve their full potential as active and responsible citizens. In both *'Performing Beyond Expectations'* and *'The Fourth Way'* Andy Hargreaves, Dennis Shirley and Alma Harris believe that community development is central to the success of Tower Hamlets as a 'turned-around district'. They argue that whilst most local authorities had endeavoured to deliver more children's services to disadvantaged and other communities, Tower Hamlets had gone further and had worked hard to create new capacity to strengthen community relations and

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engagement. For example it had worked with faith-based organisations and formal agreements with the Imams from this largely Muslim community to counter the effects of children taking several days' holiday for religious festivities such as Eid and taking extended holidays in Bangladesh in term time. Another example was the development of some schools into community centres, establishing extended service and providing resources and recreation for children and young people and adults. The Authority has also developed a number of Children and Families Partnerships working very hard to engage parents.

Such community investment has paid dividends. Survey respondents related to the majority Bangladeshi population report that parents have positive home attitudes to schools with exceptionally high attendance at all parents' meetings. Similarly the students display positive attitudes towards school and learning generally. This is reflected in high attendance levels despite the challenges and disadvantages the community faces. The ISAP (Improving School Attendance Project) started in 2002 as a collaboration between the LA and the East London Mosque. The aim was to form policy on long holidays that would in turn improve the attendance of Bangladeshi pupils and improve their attainment. In 2005 the LA undertook a study of the impact of long holidays on the attainment of pupils and found that underachievement was worse amongst those with lower prior attainment. The Mosques backed the Council in stating that extended absences would be treated as truancy because the educational achievement mattered greatly to the community (and ISAP statistics show that 100% of pupils now have 90% or above attendance after an ISAP intervention).

An important factor that strengthened community engagement in Tower Hamlets in support of education was 'workforce remodelling' (see Theme 2 from page 27). This legislation was designed to place more teaching assistants and other staff in schools to support teachers. Over time as many as half the adults in many schools in Tower Hamlets came from the community itself, developing strong relationships with teachers and school leaders. The Authority has been particularly active in encouraging the development of teaching assistants from the local community but also encouraging them to go further and train as teachers or other community workers.

Hargreaves and Shirley refer to 'building communities of active trust, engagement and advocacy that brings about improvement'. This is also true of governing bodies where the Authority has worked very hard with the community to recruit Governors and currently they have more applications than they can

place. Governing bodies are increasingly representative of the communities they serve and they feel valued as part of the wider learning community, and this “has been helped by bodies such as the Collective of Bangladeshi School Governors ... although more still needs to be done here, especially in recruiting Bangladeshi Chairs of Governors” (Interview evidence). Of course the success of the schools both in performance and inspection reflects well upon their efforts and encourages them even more to play a full part in the life of the schools.

A particular feature of community relations and engagement in Tower Hamlets are the school and community based projects used very effectively to promote citizenship and community cohesion. For example peer mentors are trained to improve relationships between younger and older residents. Activities promoted through the Inter-Faith Forum promote community cohesion and inter-faith understanding across schools. The youth service reaches very good numbers of young people through a range of community based services and the youth participation team ensures that children’s voices are heard. There are many opportunities for young people to engage in service development and they are represented on many partnership groups, some attaining accreditation through their involvement. There is a Youth Parliament and a Youth Mayor leads on the Youth Opportunities Fund and distributes funding for activities and facilities.

A great example of partnership working is the Tower Hamlets Education Business Partnership (EBP), an independent charity, one of the most successful in the country, working with almost 200 businesses and community organisations. It has worked for more than 20 years to bring schools and business together to help children and young people succeed. Companies and their employees have been engaged to deliver a portfolio of programmes and activities through nursery, primary, special, secondary and post 16 provision. These school/business partnerships are mutually beneficial. Volunteers offer time and expertise to schools in a way that supplements classroom learning particularly in literacy and numeracy skills. Young people have an opportunity to learn about and sample different careers and how they can work towards their goals. Employers value the chance to invest in the community, develop the skills of their employees and help shape the world of tomorrow. Many donate additional resources to the schools they partner. This might be in the form of finance, goods or services or extra time and expertise. In primary schools the EBP’s Reading and Number programmes provide an extra opportunity for children to practise their reading and maths. Business volunteers typically visit over lunchtime to listen to children read and to develop their comprehensive

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skills in a way that is enjoyable. Our interview data with heads refers to many examples of powerful partnerships, in particular for reading sometimes engaging up to 100 reading partners every week.

For secondary schools business mentoring, usually starting in Year 9 or 10, is one of the longest running programmes, offering young people access to a regular meeting with an adviser from the business world. There are also subject-specific mentoring schemes including language liaison and sports mentoring. Equipping young people with an awareness of the world of work and the skills to secure meaningful employment are at the heart of the Partnership's work. A range of long-standing programmes have now been brought together into a standard 'Passport to Employability' offer leading to a qualification in work skills. Up to 2011 the EBP played a very important role in promoting the benefits of Higher Education through the Aim Higher programme particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. When this programme was ended by the government the EBP, working with a major bank, replaced this with Aim2 Attain, developing new relationships with a range of universities to provide more opportunities for students. In terms of academic support generally the partnership has been able to offer series of residential skills weekends combining intensive study sessions with outdoor activities. Another key element of the Partnership's work is to nurture a financially literate generation and there have been a range of programmes in partnership with business since 2005. All secondary schools can sign up to a service level agreement drawing on a wide range of enterprise and financial literacy activities. Primary schools too have been involved for several years with regular features in the school calendar. Many of the EBP's programmes require the development of presentation skills, shaping and putting across ideas, sustaining a coherent argument, and working in teams. Primary and secondary students are continually given the chance to practise these skills and there is both a Tower Hamlets Public Speaking Competition and a Presentation Skills Competition sponsored by business. Other aspects of support to schools includes the recruitment of business professionals to join school governing bodies, short placements in business to enable teaching staff to keep abreast of changes in the workplace, and a range of professional development days and other opportunities. Since its inception the Tower Hamlets Education Business Partnership has been a powerful source of support to schools in helping young people to attain and achieve and be successful in their adult lives.

#### **4.7 Theme 7: a resilient approach to external government policies and pressure**

Hargreaves and Shirley argue that a key factor in Tower Hamlets' success was 'a resilient but not reckless approach to external government pressure and policy – accepting the importance of testing and targets but deciding to set their own targets and resisting the politically motivated pressure to build new high school academies since the Authority already had high-trust relationships with its schools that now performed very well' (2009: 67). As one survey respondent affirmed: "Tower Hamlets stands out as being at once 'closer to the ground' and with more of a sense of its own identity and vision. There is less of a sense that senior leaders are box-ticking against a Westminster agenda. I would go so far as to say that there is a sense of moral purpose about what goes on in Tower Hamlets that I have often found lacking at a senior level in other authorities." Similarly, during our interviews with LA officers it was suggested that: "What might work nationally, might not always work in the Tower Hamlets context [in relation to culture, language, homogeneity of the population etc]." However, there was also recognition from LA officers and education consultants that Tower Hamlets had been determined to make government policies work for them and get the best out of them and there had been many instances of effective partnership working with the Department for Education and other government bodies. Kevan Collins put it like this: "We did not set out to be innovative or to re-invent education. We adopted both the primary and secondary national strategies and we set out to be brilliant at implementation – we wanted to do basic stuff and get it right."

The low point in education outcomes in Tower Hamlets coincided with the coming to power of the Labour government in 1997. At the same time Christine Gilbert became Director of Education and one part of the new Director and Tower Hamlets' recovery strategy was to engage directly and positively with the government's requirement for education development plans, implementation of the national literacy and numeracy strategies and an emphasis on rigorous targets, pupil tracking and testing. A strategic education plan included a rigorous education development plan for school improvement and a set of ambitious targets within a new climate of high expectations was developed. The Education Development Plan priorities, maintained over a number of years, included raising standards in literacy and numeracy, improving teaching and learning across the whole curriculum, strengthening leadership, management and governance, supporting schools causing concern and building a more inclusive education

service. With regard to literacy and numeracy Tower Hamlets became a pilot for some early initiatives at Key Stage 2 and 3 and then robustly implemented the national strategies setting their own ambitious targets for improvement. There was also a robust approach to schools causing concern with clear policies and plans towards targeted interventions. Another government initiative from 2000 that the Local Authority took full advantage of was 'Excellence in Cities', being granted £4 million for the first two years which enabled it to plan with Headteachers a further range of support for schools such as a city learning centre, specialist and beacon schools, learning support units and learning mentors, support for gifted and talented pupils and three small Education Action Zones in Poplar, the Isle of Dogs and in Globetown. These areas provided a good match with the broad intentions of the Authority especially in tackling under-achievement and social exclusion. The Authority also took full advantage of the New Deal for Communities funding, part of a government initiative to help some of the most deprived authorities in the country to tackle unemployment, crime, poor health and educational underachievement. In general the Authority enjoyed a good relationship with the Department for Education in particular and also with other Government departments and by 2005 Ofsted could report that the Council's services were making an Outstanding contribution to improving educational outcomes with attainment above statistical neighbours and rapidly closing the gap on national averages at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. The Authority has risen to the challenge from external government and made good use of the support offered. Christine Gilbert reports that on at least one occasion she needed to challenge government advisers to set higher, more challenging, rather than lower and more contextual, targets for the schools in Tower Hamlets. The appointment of Kevan Collins as Director in 2005, the former Director of the National Literacy Strategy, brought fresh impetus into Tower Hamlets' approach to, and the considered implementation of, government education policies. One area of considerable success was the way the Authority put into place the Every Child Matters agenda relating to being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic wellbeing, building on its own policies and programmes in these fields. Annual performance assessments of services and Joint Area Reviews (previously referred to) judged Tower Hamlets to be Good and Outstanding in all these aspects. In terms of education outcomes rates of improvement had continued to rise with the primary schools with significant gains in secondary education. Indeed the Authority was awarded Beacon status by the government for its work in early interventions and school improvement. The London Challenge had been

launched in September, 2003 lasting until Spring, 2011 and LA leaders engaged fully with this, Kevan Collins being part of the London LA Reference Group. He makes the point in a chapter entitled 'An East End Tale' in *The Tail* edited by Paul Marshall (2013), that 'Tower Hamlets never saw London Challenge as a threat to its leadership and embraced the approach with many of the Borough's Headteachers given key roles and rightly asked to share their work and support others. The strategy thus played to the strong local traditions of collaborative partnership working'. Until 2008 this was a secondary strategy and over the years four Tower Hamlets secondary schools were designated as 'Keys to Success Schools' by London Challenge with reference to low attainment and/or poor Ofsted outcomes. The support and challenge for those schools is a good example of effective partnership working with London Challenge and the Department for Education and as we write in 2013 two of those schools are now Outstanding and the other two have been judged to be Good. With the primary schools joining London Challenge from 2008, many Tower Hamlets outstanding school leaders qualified as either London or National Leaders of Education. These then worked with the Authority and London Challenge to support schools often in 'Learning Threes'. Over the years Tower Hamlets LA schools worked on a range of programmes in partnership with London Challenge with mutual benefits. Tower Hamlets, with the confidence of rapid rates of progress and increased attainment in schools and the benefit of sustained local partnership working, has been able to retain local autonomy and promote local initiatives for school improvement. It has also demonstrated a resilient and adaptive approach to external government policies and pressure engaging with a range of government initiatives and challenges and getting the best out of them for the benefit of its schools. However, the present national policy context of the introduction of academies and free schools provides a new challenge. At the time of writing there are only two academies in Tower Hamlets and three free schools<sup>5</sup>. The challenges for local authorities and their schools are in many respects greater than ever: retrenchment in public spending means reviewing service provision; changes in school governance shift the balance of power between different partners; national strategies which could be customised have disappeared. The challenge will be for schools to continue to demonstrate high performance and for the Council to work imaginatively with them in order to build on what has been achieved: excellence secured by community schools working in partnership with each other so that all children and young people can attain and achieve.

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<sup>5</sup> Bethnal Green Academy; Sir William Burrough Academy; Free schools: Wapping High, Constable Education Trust, Canary Wharf College.



## 5 Conclusions

The achievements of Tower Hamlets and its schools after 1998 were exceptional. Across the Borough, all schools improved. Across the Borough, the educational outcomes for all groups of pupils were substantially improved. And, beyond this, the Borough embedded a shared commitment to high standards and high expectations across the community, the Council and schools. By any measure, the achievement is considerable. In this final section we engage in speculation: what were the key factors in Tower Hamlets' improvement? What are the lessons for policy and practice? And, at a time when governments across the world continue to drive change in education, what are the implications for national and global educational practices?

### 5.1 Explaining transformation

We begin by identifying six major factors which explain the Tower Hamlets experience:

- Shared values and beliefs with robust and resilient purpose and professional will. 'Yes we can...'
- Highly effective and ambitious leadership at all levels – Local Authority and school leadership.
- Schools rising to the standards challenge – improved teaching and learning, enhanced Continuing Professional Development, rigorous pupil tracking and assessment, a relentless focus on school improvement.
- Partnership working – inward and outward facing, external and integrated services, shared responsibility and accountability.
- Community development – building collaborative capacity and community cohesion.
- A professional learning community – building momentum and engagement through and across school communities, high levels of knowledge, trust and professional relationships.

***Shared values and a robust and resilient purpose***

Reflecting upon a considerable range of both written and oral evidence what stands out is a sense of shared values, purpose and endeavour to overcome considerable barriers to achievement. There is a shared language of ‘no excuses’, ‘challenges to be overcome’, ‘high aspirations and expectations’, ‘no cap on ambition’, ‘a relentless focus on improving standards’, ‘benchmarking performance’ together with ‘community cohesion and collaboration’. In a community of fewer than 100 schools with Local Authority and school leaders who have tended to stay for considerable periods of time, strong professional relationships have been established with the Local Authority getting behind the efforts of schools rather than on top of them and a collective spirit of ‘trying anything to make it work better’. High levels of trust seem to exist between school professionals, the community and the Local Authority so when there are problems and difficulties they are sorted out together rather than through conflict and confrontation. There are also high levels of consultation between schools, the Authority and the community with the emphasis on being ‘done with’ rather than ‘done to’. This may explain, in part, why to date hardly any of Tower Hamlets’ schools, in contrast to some neighbouring boroughs, have chosen to become independent academies. It is clear that the Local Authority knows its schools extremely well, whether related to school improvement or other aspects of community provision, and support and challenge is grounded in consistent and direct personal knowledge and good professional relationships.

***Highly effective and ambitious leadership at all levels***

Of course such a climate of trust and collaboration is hard won and can easily be lost but it has been achieved, and continues to be sustained, through effective leadership at all levels in the Tower Hamlets community. Political leadership has been very important with education always being the top priority of the Council with sustained, high levels of funding to back up the determination to achieve against the odds and demonstrate that ‘deprivation is not destiny’. We have referred in the text particularly to the visionary and inspired leadership of Christine Gilbert and Kevan Collins who were in post as Directors of Education and Children’s Services for the majority of this period and who also went on to be Chief Executives of the Local Authority, thereby maintaining their influence over education priorities. They were very ably assisted by a core of highly professional and long serving advisers and officers who drove the education improvement agenda forward at a pace. As also previously referenced, Tower Hamlets has managed to recruit and keep many exceptional school leaders who

with their staff and Governors have fostered a climate of high expectations and delivered such impressive outcomes. Good leadership at all levels in the school and Local Authority workforce has led to high levels of morale through a climate of mutual trust and strong respect for everybody's professionalism. Of course success breeds success and from those early days of struggle the educational community of Tower Hamlets has enjoyed an increasing momentum of success through more Good and Outstanding schools, raising standards of achievement and closing gaps between the performance of groups of pupils. Indeed school leaders in Tower Hamlets seem to have engendered a sense of 'collaborative competition' with ambitious targets for improvement and a sense that if one school can raise standards significantly so can another which had a chain reaction across the different schools and areas in the Local Authority. There is also a general commitment to cross-school collaboration which can be seen in the transition arrangements between primary and secondary schools, two post 16 consortia of schools, and a variety of family and community projects. It is also seen at its best when schools come to the assistance of other schools which for various reasons are under-performing and provide extra capacity to help them recover and succeed.

We have also referred in the text to a resilient approach to external government policies applied by both Local Authority and school leaders, by which we mean the willingness to engage fully with a range of government initiatives and challenges from the early days of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, with shared targets for raising attainment, through to the London Challenge programmes including partnership interventions in particular schools. That is not to say that education leaders slavishly followed the agendas of successive governments but rather got the best out of them and 'customised' them to meet local needs better whilst maintaining Local Authority priorities and promoting local initiatives.

### ***Schools rising to the challenge***

Schools, of course, lie at the heart of the education improvement agenda. The lessons of Tower Hamlets are clear, if often complex. In 1998, schools were unable to lead their own transformation. There were good schools: but even the best schools in the Borough were complacent about what were, from an external perspective, modest levels of performance. There was individual outstanding practice, but the very best was pursued in isolation, with little impact on other schools. As improvement began to take hold, schools' expectations rose, but

even as they did there were good and successful Headteachers who doubted that they could achieve more. But schools in Tower Hamlets have been transformed: improved leadership, improved teaching, better learning. Some have been physically transformed with bold, imaginative investment. We are clear that educational improvement involves transforming schools, raising expectations, improving teaching, putting in place often basic but essential routines. But the Tower Hamlets lesson goes beyond school improvement, and beyond schools' capacity to improve themselves. It is clear that early on, Tower Hamlets schools were unable to improve themselves. As one of our interviewees put it, "they did not know what good looked like". They needed the robust challenge of strong professional leadership which challenged all schools, and persuaded all schools that, as the American surgeon Atul Gawande puts it, "better is possible". Schools were able to rise to the challenge, but after 1998 they needed to be challenged. The early steps in improvement probably could not have come from schools themselves; what was needed was robust challenge in an active relationship with the Local Authority. Over time system reform was neither system-led nor led by individual schools but through what David Hopkins has called "an actively interdependent mutually beneficial relationship". Although the external scrutiny of Ofsted and government was critical, the challenge needed to be mediated by an effective and well-run local authority. The lessons of 1998 are clear: local authorities can be the problem, but they can also be the solution. Well-managed, well-run and demanding local authorities can drive education transformation.

### ***Partnership working***

Implied in this is a commitment to partnership working. The analysis here goes beyond the partnership between schools and the Local Authority, critical though this was. Change needed leading, and was led by the Local Authority, but other key partners were brought to the table such as parents, local communities and faith-based organisations. The work of the Tower Hamlets Education-Business Partnership was critical. As with other factors, it can be argued that what the EBP did was simply to organise what was already there: a large school population and some extremely large and important employers, including some of the world's leading financial institutions. We might agree with this, except for the word 'simply': what the Tower Hamlets EBP did was to manage and make fruitful partnerships with employers which could have been – and for a long time had been – less fruitful. Tower Hamlets, it could be argued, was also fortunate in the national political landscape, working with a government which saw improving

schools in London as a priority and committed to a large-scale intervention – London Challenge – to bringing about improvement. There is, again, truth in this, but the truth does not capture the speed and extent of the transformation in Tower Hamlets, and the important policy lesson is that local leadership was able, willing and determined to make partnerships work for local outcomes. The commitment was to improving outcomes for young people, and, in a practical, determined way to work with whoever was available to do so. With hindsight, it can be the case that by 2006 Tower Hamlets was working to improve with a national policy agenda which was consistent with what it was trying to achieve but this misses the point: the leaders of change in Tower Hamlets knew what they were trying to achieve and were bold and ambitious in fashioning partnerships which helped them to do that.

### ***Community development***

The importance of community engagement has been cited by Hargreaves and Shirley in their account of Tower Hamlets' success in their report on the 'global fourth way' (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009). We agree with them that the community played a critical role, but we are sharper in our judgement about what worked and why. The emergence of a strongly ambitious, often Bengali heritage, political leadership in the 1980s and 1990s brought to power a local political leadership with high educational expectations. The educational community was unable to meet those expectations, and the political leadership, for all its commitments, lacked the technical expertise to realise its ambitions for education – as is almost always the case for political leadership. There was a coalescence in 1998 of strong and ambitious political leadership willing to take a considerable risk in appointing a chief education officer with no experience in inner urban education, but who nonetheless was ambitious and technically skilled, and a national policy agenda no longer prepared to accept excuses from urban schooling. The idea that poverty is not an excuse for under-achievement was familiar to the political leadership. What was needed to operationalise it was strong professional leadership and, once these were yoked together a systematic approach to community engagement: for example, extensive work with Imams to help persuade families that it was not a good idea for children to be taken back to south Asia for extended family holidays, to the detriment of school attendance. Particular effective features of community relations and development focused upon work with parents and Children and Families Partnerships alongside a considerable range of community plans building community participation and cohesion.

### ***A professional learning community***

Our final explanatory factor lies in professional transformation. Inner London has always been an attractive place for young teachers to start their career, but retaining and developing teachers in London has been more challenging. Several of our interviewees talked about the “offer” in Tower Hamlets – hard-edged elements such as help with housing costs, but also a strong professional development offer, with outstanding behaviour support, a consistent and coherent programme of professional development, with a strong Headteacher programme, a strong middle leader programme, a strong and on-going teacher development programme, marked by partnership with a university, and a strong newly qualified teacher programme. Many local authorities might make similar claims. In Tower Hamlets these claims were sustained. The Local Authority built momentum and engagement through and across school communities. As improvement took hold high levels of trust and professional relationships were built. For many of those we have talked to, the combination of moral commitment (to improving the life chances of some of the most deprived children in the country) commitment to place (the commitment to this community on the edge of central London), and the sense of what it meant to be a teacher in that community combined to drive their practice and to shape their thinking. This is a rare and precious achievement. By 2013, when we completed this work, there was a real pride in the achievements of Tower Hamlets, and a profound commitment to its continuing success.

## **5.2 The lessons of Tower Hamlets**

This study is retrospective. It has set out to explore, and thus to explain, an extraordinary transformation. It is written at a time of profound and rapid change in education policy and structures. Many of these changes are impacting powerfully on the world of schools in Tower Hamlets. It was, for example, a proud boast of the Authority between 1998 and 2010 that it transformed its schools without the structural changes in education which happened elsewhere – there were no academies in Tower Hamlets. But in 2013 there are now two academies and there are plans for three free schools. Other changes may have parallel impacts. The Authority is no longer able, for example, to offer preferential access to housing to new teachers in the Borough.

It has been our contention in this paper that the transformation of schooling in Tower Hamlets depended on a number of linked factors: committed political

leadership; challenging professional leadership; a robust approach to selecting from, and then rigorously managing, external policy imperatives; the engagement of schools; the judicious spending of generous levels of resourcing. We cannot answer counter-factual questions with precision, but it is our belief that whilst different approaches would still have seen improvement in some schools, the coherent, area-wide improvement which we saw in Tower Hamlets would not have been possible without the strong political and professional leadership which the Authority, its leaders and its officers were able to exert.

The world of 2013 is different. Tower Hamlets schools continue to be well-resourced, not least because the Pupil Premium brings resource into schools with large numbers of disadvantaged pupils. It is also the case that there is a strong commitment – across both community schools and academies – to collaborative working. But the challenges are different. There are robust systems and processes in place in Tower Hamlets, but as the pattern of education provision diversifies, the Authority will need to find new ways to exercise leadership, and new ways to engage schools in the common enterprise of securing exceptional outcomes for young people. Tower Hamlets remains an educational success story. But the success was hard won after 1998. It is not guaranteed in the future.

### 5.3 Tower Hamlets and school reform

Charles Payne's account of American school reform, *'So Much Reform, So Little Change'* is subtitled 'the persistence of failure in urban schools'. His account of the failure of repeated waves of school reform to bring about significant improvement in America's urban schools is compelling reading. Payne is dismissive of reform which is disconnected from the daily realities of urban schools, dismissive of grand theories of change, and concludes that 'there is no one lever we can move which will give us the purchase we need' (Payne, 2008: 47). Payne argues that successful reform depends on what he calls 'five fundamentals': instructional leadership; professional capacity; establishing a learning climate; family and community involvement and the quality of instruction. Moreover, successful school reform is 'comprehensive, sustained and intense'. Payne's book ends with a coruscating denunciation of what he calls 'liberal and conservative theories of school reform' – the one arguing that school reform is impossible without serious assaults on poverty and the circumstances which create failure, and the other that circumstances do not

matter, that incentive structures alone can drive change (Payne, 2008: 192-3). Both, he argues, are extremely damaging to children. In practice, says Payne, we know a great deal about successful reform, and he concludes his book with a mantra for effective reform:

***Give them teaching that is determined, energetic and engaging. Hold them to high standards. Expose them to as much as you can, most especially the arts. Root the school in the community and take advantage of the culture the children bring with them. Pay attention to their social and ethical development. Recognise the reality of race, poverty and other social barriers but make children understand that barriers don't have to limit their lives ... Above all, no matter where in the social structure children are coming from, act as if their possibilities are boundless (Payne, 2008: 211-2).***

Such a description tells the story of Tower Hamlets' success very well and it is possible and useful to look at Tower Hamlets in the context of what we know about effective urban school improvement and reform across the world. For too long, the assumption of research and policy has been that effort must only be focussed on reforming and improving individual schools. But school reform at scale – successfully improving areas and districts – is more challenging. Individual schools can drive their own improvement but system improvement needs something more. Serious and sustained improvement is a story of interdependence. In Tower Hamlets, schools are now able to lead change with confidence, but they do so on an infrastructure of interdependence developed over the improvement journey. In the future, schools and the Local Authority will need to respect each other for what they bring to what will, inevitably, be a changing relationship.

Tower Hamlets is therefore a very important case study because of what it tells us about area based reform. This is important for any number of reasons. If we can move our reform and improvement efforts from schools to areas we have the prospect of improving the life chances for not sub-sets of children – important though this might be – but for all children and young people which is one of the central messages of the recent Ofsted report, *'Unseen Children – Access and Achievement 20 years on'* (2013). If schools and their communities can bring about systemic improvement, then all benefit, and not simply a fortunate few who have found their way into more successful schools. It is the achievement of Tower Hamlets that it has made significant progress on that score. The worldwide research is clear that there are some essential ingredients for school



reform at scale. Heather Zavadsky's detailed study of five north American school districts (Zavadsky, 2010: 272) is clear that the initial ingredient, on which all else depends, is 'climate or culture' – the buzz which leads to belief that success is possible and eventually establishes trust. Beyond this 'reform needs to look different depending on the community – though standards and expectations need to be high and consistent'. In the same way, Ben Levin's conclusions on 'how to change 5000 schools' set out some simple, but to those seeking to lead and manage change, far from obvious, propositions: focus on a few key student outcomes that matter most and are most understandable; put effort into building capacity for improvement; build motivation by taking a positive approach; and work to increase public and political support for reform (Levin, 2008: 234-6). These were the lessons learnt in Tower Hamlets and, it is worth noting, learnt before Payne, Zavadsky and Levin had synthesised their own understandings of the nature of successful urban reform.

The experience of Tower Hamlets since 1998 is inspirational. It shows that improvement is not only possible but achievable, that improvement in some schools does not need to be bought at the expense of others and that improvement, once attained, can not only be sustained but surpassed. As a result, it is not unreasonable to argue that what Tower Hamlets has created are some of the best urban schools in the world. This is a genuinely exceptional achievement, worth celebrating, worth understanding, but, above all, worth learning from.



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