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Letter to Mayor John Biggs and Rt. Hon. Sajid Javid MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

cc. Will Tuckley, Chief Executive, LBTH
Councillor Peter Golds, Conservative Group Leader
Councillor Oliur Rahman, Independent Group Leader
Councillor Rabina Khan, Peoples' Alliance Tower Hamlets Group Leader
Aisling Lyon, Department for Communities and Local Government

21 February 2017

Dear Mayor and Secretary of State,

Directions under Section 15(5) of the Local Government Act 1999, 2014-2015-2017

Commissioners' response to the Best Value Action Plan 6 month report dated 17 February 2017

Commissioners record, with satisfaction, their endorsement of the progress that has been made in all areas of the Direction regime over the past 6 months. In particular, they welcome the realistic appreciation, by the Council, of what has been done, but also, what remains to be done to fulfil the expectations of the original and revised Directions. The Council acknowledges that it will take some 12 months to complete all the work required. This is seen as a reasonable timetable properly based on evidenced achievement and direction of travel.

Had the Council taken appropriate steps at the outset of the Direction regime to comply with the requirements to deliver better value and fairer services to all its residents Commissioners would have been able to record completion. However, the obstruction, delay and non-compliance by the previous political and officer leadership of the Authority have delayed a fair outcome for the area at an increased cost.

As all activity required under the original and revised Directions has not been completed, the Secretary of State will need to decide what to do for the future. The proposition by the Council to establish a cross party Best Value Improvement Board, chaired by the Mayor personally, with external representatives to provide suitable challenge is supported by Commissioners

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as a sensible proposal to facilitate and monitor the Council's continued progress in both Direction and non-Direction areas. Reporting to Ministers on a regular basis will provide a useful public overview of the total position and Commissioners recommend that the Secretary of State gives this serious consideration as an alternative to just extending the Direction regime. It may be that some additional safeguards are required but overall Commissioners believe that this is a sound proposal.

On some specific issues of interest Commissioners make the following observations.

Clear Up Team

The institution of this process followed a specific observation from the then Secretary of State. Commissioners judge that this is on the way to being a significant success. Although all the work to finalise the more complex investigations will not be complete by March 2017, it has proved to be a very useful way to lance long standing sores from the past and provide confidence in the Council's whistleblowing procedures for the future. Many lessons have been learned all of which are intended to be documented in a report to full Council in June 2017. Particular mention needs to be made of the work of the Project Co-ordinator, James Richardson, a secondee from the Cabinet Office, whose approach and diligence has driven the whole process forward to completion.

Culture

The Clear Up team is part of a wider project to improve the culture and working relationships between Members and Officers and between Members on the Council. This is not explicitly covered by Directions and is necessarily of a much longer duration. It is however a crucial part of restoring the basics of good local government to Tower Hamlets and needs to continue beyond the 2018 election.

Grants

The amendment to the Directions in January 2017 returned decision making powers in this area to the Council with Commissioner oversight. It is fair to say that the Council is still learning and improving how to do this effectively. The necessary changes to the officer support arrangements will provide a more professional and less conflicted service to Members and the voluntary sector but the Council will need to take care to ensure they have properly thought through the policy and practice implications as they seek to impose a consistent approach on the incoherence of the past.

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Monitoring Officer

There is a relatively small field of appointable candidates for the permanent appointment but it should be possible for the Council to select a candidate who will be able to guide the Council and its Members in probity and make a significant contribution to the management and leadership of the Authority.

Property

The policy framework for the proper use of the Council's physical assets is now in place. Working through the implications of past decisions to bring fairness consistency and transparency will require determined effort and political support in doing the right thing rather than the expedient thing.

Looking back over the three years, Commissioners can see the changes that were required are starting to be embedded in the Council's psyche. It is gratifying that the Mayor acknowledges the role that Commissioners have played to bring this about.

Yours sincerely,



Sir Ken Knight,
Lead Commissioner

Max Caller,
Commissioner

Chris Allison,
Commissioner

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