

# London Borough of Tower Hamlets



**Tower Hamlets covers the heart of London’s traditional East End. Despite bordering the City, this is an area once largely associated with poverty, violence and dodgy local politics. The redevelopment of the Docklands and Canary Wharf in the late 1990s began to change things until now, 30 years on, areas such as Whitechapel and Brick Lane have become synonymous with artworld cool and rocketing real estate prices.**

In truth the old boroughs now comprising Tower Hamlets – Bethnal Green, Poplar and Bow – were all those things at various times. But more than most other areas, this swathe of the capital has consistently, and over centuries, been most notable for providing safe haven for waves of people seeking refuge.

Whether C17th French Huguenots, C19th Ashkenazi Jews or 1970s Bangladeshis, this stretch of the East End has become home to successive generations of immigrants fleeing persecution and bringing with them energy and entrepreneurial flare. To say nothing of wonderful food!

Poorer parts of the Tower Hamlets definitely still exist which is why the council has a positive approach to regeneration, seeing it as the route to bringing much needed new housing into the more deprived parts of their borough.



FACTS AND FIGURES	
POPULATION	324,745 <sup>2</sup>
AGE	In 2019 the ONS estimated that the borough had one of the youngest populations in the UK; median age 31.6
ETHNICITY	69% of Tower Hamlets residents are Black, Asian or minority ethnic. <sup>3</sup> 43% of which were born outside the UK. <sup>4</sup>
POLITICS	Labour holds 40 of the borough’s 45 council seats Aspire 2 Conservatives 1 Independent Conservatives 1 Liberal Democrats 1

## LEADING POLITICIANS

### Mayor John Biggs

**Tower Hamlets is one of only four London boroughs with a directly elected Mayor. Labour’s John Biggs became mayor in 2015 after a special election was called to replace the previous incumbent who was removed from office.**

Mayor Biggs – solidly re-elected with 48% 1st preference & 65% 2nd preference votes in 2018 – runs a borough dominated by Labour. Of the 45 available council seats Labour currently hold 40.



Mayor John Biggs

### His background

Though born in nearby Barnet, the Mayor’s roots in the borough stretch back a long way. After graduating (in chemistry) from Bristol University, John Biggs worked for a time as an analyst in the City before becoming director of a political pressure group.

He was first elected to Tower Hamlets council in 1988 and became Leader in 1994. Between 2000 and 2016 he also represented the City and East London Constituency on the London Assembly.

### His politics

As a previous Vice Chair of the London Development Agency and Deputy Chairman of the London Thames Gateway Development Corporation, the Mayor has a longstanding interest in regeneration and among his stated political priorities is “tackling the housing crisis” in Tower Hamlets and improving its physical environment.

Mayor Biggs has been a successful London politician for many years. Unsurprisingly he has a good ear for popular causes. This might account for why in October 2020 the Mayor took the unusual step of responding to two public petitions calling for a return to cabinet decision-making by changing the borough’ constitution and giving up some of his own powers. He decided that from then on he would make decisions in concert with senior Cabinet members instead of simply consulting with them before taking the decisions on his own. (*East London Advertiser* 29 Oct 2020).

This seemingly collegiate gesture has not however diluted the Mayor’s ruthless streak when it comes to dealing with Cabinet appointments. Doubtless with an eye on this May’s local elections, the Mayor “refreshed” his Cabinet at the end of the Summer 2021, sacking two Cabinet members. Announcing the changes the Mayor explained that his focus was on performance saying it “is right that we consider and reflect on our priorities from time to time, and it is important that we listen to local people, which we have done.”

### The return of Lutfur Rahman?

**Politics in Tower Hamlets has frequently been volatile, not just at local level. While Mayor Biggs’s and his Labour colleagues’ hold on the council currently looks unassailable history shows that political fortunes can and do change quickly in Tower Hamlets.**

- From 1986 – 1994 Liberal Democrats ran Tower Hamlets; they now have a single councillor.
- At the 2006 local elections, fuelled by the lingering unpopularity of the Iraq invasion, the Respect party won 12 seats to Labour’s 24, becoming the main opposition party. The year before Respect’s candidate – maverick George Galloway – had beaten Labour in the previously safe Parliamentary seat of Bethnal Green & Bow. By 2020 Respect had one council seat.
- In 2010 former Labour Leader Lutfur Rahman became the borough’s first directly elected Mayor on a 60% turnout. He was accompanied into office by 18 fellow *Independent* councillors.
- Re-elected as Mayor in 2014 (representing *Tower Hamlets First*), Mr Rahman was forced out just a year later by an election court that found him guilty of electoral fraud and banned him from standing for election for five years.
- The party Lutfur Rahman founded while barred from office – Aspire – holds just two Tower Hamlets council seats. However, Aspire’s by-election win last August in the previously safe Labour council seat of Weavers Ward has raised the prospect that Rahman’s recently announced return to frontline politics might actually be a real threat to John Biggs. Though the Weavers Ward election campaign centred around a specific local issue, Aspire’s win suggests that Lutfur Rahman’s past electoral misdeeds are not being held against him, nor do they damage the electoral chances of the party he founded.

**What does this history of political volatility in the borough show us? Turnout at Tower Hamlets local elections is commonly low (well below 35%) but there is a *significant* block of electors that will come out to vote – against the incumbents – if they are sufficiently motivated. Unfortunately, some past campaigns have used race and religion to fuel that motivation.**

<sup>1</sup> Boundary Commission’s final borough map – showing wards – 2013 <sup>2</sup> Tower Hamlets 2020  
<sup>3</sup> ONS 2011 Census <sup>4</sup> ONS 2018 Mid-Year Estimates

## London Borough of Tower Hamlets

### LEADING COUNCILLORS / PORTFOLIOS

The Mayor runs the borough with the help of a Cabinet that he appoints. There are nine Cabinet posts and currently 10 councillors fill those roles, two on a job share basis. Three of the Cabinet members are also Deputy Mayors.

- **Cllr Asma Begum, Deputy Mayor for Children, Youth Services and Education**
- **Cllr Rachel Blake, Deputy Mayor for Adults, Health and Wellbeing**
- **Cllr Motin Uz-Zaman, Deputy Mayor for Work and Economic Growth**
- **Cllr Sirajul Islam, Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Faith and Equalities**
- **Cllr Candida Ronald, Cabinet Member for Resources and the Voluntary Sector**
- **Cllr Sabina Akhtar, Cabinet Member for Culture, Arts and Brexit**
- **Cllr Mufedah Bustin, Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion (Part Time)**
- **Cllr Kahar Chowdhury, Cabinet Member for Highways and Public Realm (Job Share)**

• **Cllr Danny Hassell, Cabinet Member for Housing (Bromley South Ward)**  
Served as a councillor since 2014. Relatively recent appointment to the Housing portfolio. Previously served as Cabinet Member for Children and Schools which suited his background as Former teacher, admin staff member at the LSE & school governor.

- **Cllr Asma Islam, Cabinet Member for Environment and Planning (Mile End Ward)**

Cllr Islam was first elected in 2018. With a voluntary sector background in women's organising and employment training, her rise up the ranks and into the Cabinet has been rapid. Her opinion is well regarded by the Mayor who appointed her Cabinet member for Environment in 2020 on a part-time basis, expanding the role and effectively promoting her in a summer of 2021.

Cllr Islam sits on London Council's Transport & Environment Committee and on Tower Hamlets own Homes Board. Re-standing in May.



Cllr Danny Hassell



Cllr Asma Islam

#### Lead Senior Officers

- **CEO – Will Tuckley**
- **Corporate Director of Place – Ann Sutcliffe**
- **Acting Corporate Director (in charge of) Resources – Kevin Bartle**

### POLITICAL PRIORITIES

Top of the Council's (non-Covid related) political priorities is:

**HOUSING.** A look at the figures shows us why:

- Tower Hamlets is the country's most densely populated local authority area – 16,237 people per square kilometre.<sup>5</sup>
- In 2017 the GLA estimated there were 129,000 households in Tower Hamlets.
- The GLA estimates that by 2030 the number of households will increase 168,000 an increase of 30% and the fastest growth in any local authority in England or Wales.
- Of these households 40% are socially rented; 33% privately rented and only 27% owner occupied.<sup>6</sup>
- As of October 2021 there were 21,249 people on the council's housing waiting list.

#### The Council's response

In October last year, the Mayor recommitted himself to delivering new council homes: "I'm committed to providing more social and affordable homes for Tower Hamlets residents.

1. Tower Hamlets pledged to deliver 2000 new council homes by 2022. Of these Mayor Biggs claims 1055 have already been delivered through a combination of building, buy-back schemes & outright purchase from developers. Sites for 1000 have been identified.
2. Increase the number of affordable homes in the borough – this is being delivered by the council's "housing partners".

### REGENERATION

A key driver for housing delivery in Tower Hamlets regeneration is focused in three main "sub-areas" all of which are designated Opportunity Areas in the London Plan.

- 1 **CITY FRINGE**
- 2 **LOWER LEA VALLEY**
- 3 **ISLE OF DOGS & SOUTH POPLAR**

#### 1 CITY FRINGE

**Area:** 898 hectares straddling parts of Tower Hamlets + its border with LB Hackney and LB Islington. Part of the Central London transport "Growth Corridor".

**Vision:** Maximising the opportunities for business & residential growth provided by Crossrail, Crossrail 2 and the "creative vibe" of Old Street, Spitalfields, Whitechapel, Dalston & Aldgate.

##### Planning Documents

- 2004 London Plan – Identified as an Opportunity Area with scope for 15,500 new homes + 50,000 new businesses by 2040 (of these 17,000 new homes had been completed by 2021.)
- 2007 – City Fringe is the subject of a Tower Hamlets Area Action Plan.
- Dec 2015 – The London Mayor's City Fringe Opportunity Area Planning Framework identifies City Fringe as "among London's most significant areas for economic growth". The document is developed in concert with TFL, LBs Tower Hamlets, Hackney & Islington and has at its heart promotion of "Tech City", London's answer to Silicon Valley.

#### 2 LOWER LEA VALLEY

**Area:** 1,450 hectares. As well as a stretch of Tower Hamlets, the area covers sections of LB Newham, Hackney and Waltham Forest.

**Vision:** Multi partnership plan to use the 2012 London Olympics as a catalyst to regenerate an area dominated by old industrial sites and waterways into a mixed use, London exurb with Olympic legacy features. The target is for 50,000 jobs & 32,000 new homes.

##### Planning Documents

- 2007 London Mayor's Lower Lea Valley (including Stratford) Opportunity Area
- 2012 Olympic Legacy SPG – Appendix 8.
- 2020 London Legacy Development Corporation Local Plan 2020-2036



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### 3 ISLE OF DOGS & SOUTH POPLAR

**Area:** 488 hectares all within LB Tower Hamlets. Includes a new Crossrail station – Canary Wharf.

**Vision:** Tower Hamlets is a “consultee” to this Mayoral/TfL strategy which aims to extend the economic success of Canary Wharf into the wider peninsula, specifically by improving infrastructure & better engagement with existing communities. The target is for 29,000 new homes and 110,000 new jobs by 2041.

#### Planning Documents

- 2004 Designated as an Opportunity Area in the London Plan
- 2019 Mayor of London’s Isle of Dogs and South Poplar Opportunity Area Planning Framework
- 2021 South Poplar Masterplan – Tower Hamlet’s own site allocations for North Quay, Billingsgate Market and Aspen Way.

## PLANNING

In Tower Hamlets there are two planning committees of interest – the Strategic Development Committee & the Development Committee.

The nine member Strategic Development Committee decides the borough’s large applications which includes those of more than 500 residential units & 30m in height. It is Chaired by Cllr Kevin Brady (Bethnal Green Ward).

The Development Committee which has seven members, meets monthly and decides applications with more than 20 objections. It is Chaired by Councillor Abdul Mukit MBE (Weavers Ward) who is also Vice-Chair of the Strategic Development Committee.

## RECENT CONTROVERSIES

### Whitechapel Bell Foundry

Planning in Tower Hamlets is frequently contentious. Recent decisions that have set the local communities against the Council include the redevelopment of the C16th Whitechapel Bell Foundry into a boutique hotel.



### The Truman Brewery

In September 2021 councillors agreed to the redevelopment of The Truman Brewery in Brick Lane into a shopping centre/office complex. Here the split was between the Council & local MP Apsana Begum who opposed it. This application received 7,000 objection letters and only 80 in support, though just 12% of the former appeared to be from locals.



## SAFE AS HOUSES?



Copyright: Ballymore

The planned Cuba Street Tower is a Ballymore scheme on the Isle of Dogs set within the borough’s *South Poplar Opportunity Area*.

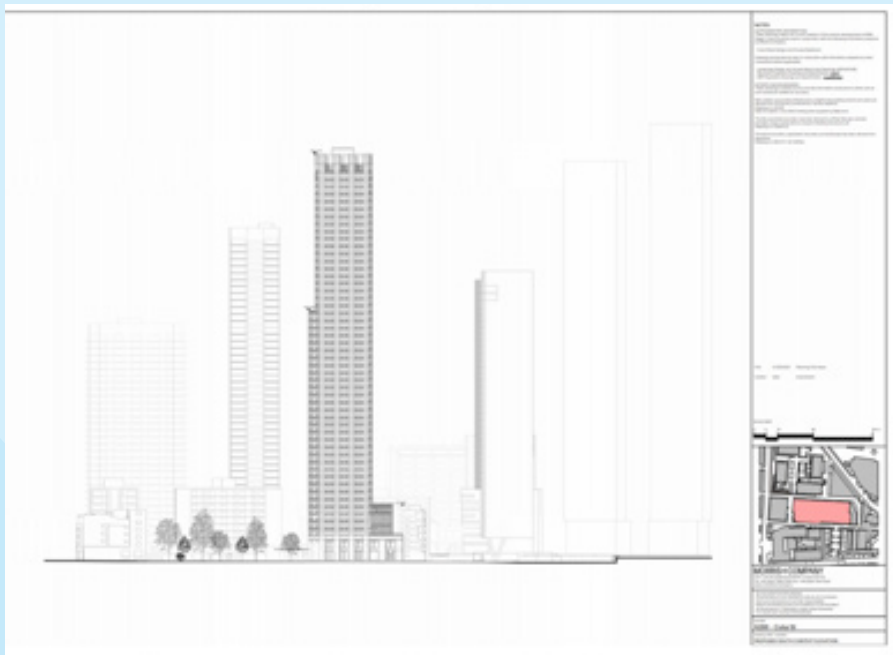
Delivering 421 homes, of which 100 are affordable, the single tower will have 655 bedrooms and will be 174 metres high.

Given the post-Grenfell Tower context, the plan to fit this 51-storey skyscraper with just a single fire escape has attracted howls of protest from architects, fire safety experts and from residents of nearby New Provident Wharf – which suffered a fire last year.

The plans, recommended for approval by officers, were due to be decided by Tower Hamlets’ strategic development committee on Thursday January 13th 2022 but the meeting was cancelled at the last minute after an objection from London Fire Brigade on the grounds of safety.

On March 15th *Architects Journal* reported that the development team has now amended the plans: they propose removing one of the lifts and replacing it with a second staircase, accessible from every floor.

Image: Tower Hamlets Planning Department





## London Borough of Tower Hamlets



### Strategic Development Committee

#### Chair, Cllr Kevin Brady (Labour, St Peter's Ward.)

Cllr Brady took over as Chair of the Strategic Development Committee in September 2021 following the death of the previous incumbent. He attracted much criticism – including in the Daily Mail – for being one of the two councillors responsible for approving the application to redevelop the Truman Brewery site in Brick Lane.

A graduate of the Scottish Academy of Music & Drama, Cllr Brady is a part-time councillor. He works as a company director of the AHA actors talent agency.

He is a Council appointed trustee of the Whitechapel Gallery and a past Chief Whip of the Labour group.



Cllr Kevin Brady

### London Assembly Member

#### Unmesh Desai



Unmesh Desai

### Local MPs

#### Rushanara Ali - MP Bethnal Green & Bow Constituency

Ms Ali was first elected to Parliament in 2010 beating George Galloway's Respect Party which had briefly – and controversially – held the seat. By winning the seat Ms Ali became the very first person of Bangladeshi origin to be elected to the U.K. Parliament. Since then she has been re-elected twice more, substantially increasing her majority each time.

She was born and raised in Tower Hamlets, attending Tower Hamlets College before going up to Oxford. Before becoming an MP Ms Ali worked in various government & non-governmental organisations: as a parliamentary researcher; for the Institute for Public Policy Research; the Foreign & Commonwealth Office; as an Associate Director of the Young Foundation a not for profit think tank that looks at ways to resolve structural inequalities.

In 2016 she was Prime Minister David Cameron's Trade Envoy for Bangladesh. She is a current member of the Treasury select Committee and she also Chairs several All Party Parliamentary Groups: Philanthropy and Social Investment; the Rights of the Rohingya; Bangladesh; and Burma.

#### Apsana Begum (Labour) Poplar & Limehouse

In 2019 Ms Begum was elected for the first time, replacing outgoing Lab MP Jim Fitzpatrick (97-2019). She held the seat with a whopping majority of 28,904.

It's note worthy that in Summer of 2021 Ms Begum was cleared at the Crown Court of housing fraud in a case brought against her by Tower Hamlets Council.

The case caused much disquiet particularly among the left wing of the national Labour Party and relations between the MP & the local authority have been significantly soured by the process. In a statement released following her acquittal Ms Begum said, "I will be consulting and considering how to follow up so that something like this doesn't happen again to anyone else."

<sup>7</sup> Guardian, July 30 2021



Rushanara Ali



Apsana Begum

