

Tower Hamlets Children's Services, London



THE ENTRY POINT

Governmental authorities, community and nonprofit organizations, religious institutions, and parents within a diverse neighborhood in central London – Tower Hamlets – work together in partnership to improve outcomes for children across a range of educational, social, health, and economic indicators.

THE CHALLENGE

How does a government-mandated authority coordinate services across a large number of institutions and individuals, and how does the “middle management” of these organizations adapt and lead within new roles?

THE PARTNERS

Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership Group:

Children's Services, Tower Hamlets

Local Learning and Skills Council

Tower Hamlets Education Business Partnership

The police

Health sector (Primary Care Trust, Mental Health Trust, and the Acute Trust)

Local residents

Head teachers

Parent governors

Young people

The Story

National Context

Victoria Climbié died in February 2000. She was just eight years old. Her parents had sent her to England for a better life, but the aunt she came to stay with and her aunt's boyfriend abused Victoria and eventually killed her. The Government asked Lord Laming to look at Victoria's death and see what we could learn from it. He found that lots of people – the police, social workers, doctors – had the chance to save Victoria but none took it. Instead of talking to each other about their worries about Victoria, they assumed that someone else was looking after her. This happened twelve times in less than a year.

– *Every Child Matters 2003*, p. 4

This investigation and the report that followed led to the U.K. government passing the Children Act 2004 and the Every Child Matters: Change for Children agenda. Within this program was a recognition that radical change was needed in the range and coordination of services provided to children. One of the key measures of the Every Child Matters agenda was the duty assigned to local authorities “to make arrangements to promote co-operation between agencies and other appropriate bodies (such as voluntary and community organisations) in order to improve children’s well-being . . . and a duty on key partners to take part in the co-operation arrangements” (*Every Child Matters: Change for Children 2005*, p. 5).

Each local authority was also required to develop a Children and Young People’s Plan and appoint a Director of Children’s Services to coordinate the multitude of organizations serving young people in each neighborhood. This “integrated, front-line delivery” of services for children would be measured by a number of indicators around the five themes of the Every Child Matters agenda – Be Healthy, Stay Safe, Enjoy and Achieve, Make a Positive Contribution, and Achieve Economic Well-Being.

Tower Hamlets

Tower Hamlets is a diverse and vibrant community in east-central London that has undergone significant change in the last decade. Over 70 percent of young people in Tower Hamlets are from ethnic minority communities, Bangladeshi being the most predominant, though large Chinese, Somali, and Vietnamese communities are also present. The population is also young, with 28.4 percent of the total population under nineteen, significantly higher than the British average of 18 percent. Almost half of the children living in the borough (47 percent) live in households receiving government benefits, and children receiving free lunches through the schools is four times the national average (*Tower Hamlets Children and Young People’s Strategic Plan 2006–2009*).

Significant structural and economic changes are taking place in Tower Hamlets. The Canary Wharf development and the upcoming London Olympics in 2012 have brought a great deal of investment and wealth to the borough. This has created a borough of striking contrasts of wealth and disadvantage.

Tower Hamlets Children’s Services authority provides education and support services for 37,000 children and has been one of only two boroughs in the nation to achieve the highest inspection ratings for the quality of its services and improvement in child outcomes each year since its inception in 2005. Kevan Collins, the Corporate Director for Children’s Services, described the evolution of services for youth in the borough: in 2002, he said, the borough had the Children’s Partnership Board, which focused primarily on social care, but without much of an emphasis on education. There was a recognition that “you’re not going to get far without that.” The Board began to develop relationships across education, social services, and the voluntary sector, and when Collins joined the Board in 2005, there were “already established working relationships [across sectors], but they weren’t mature at that point.”

In 2006, the Tower Hamlets Children and Young People’s Plan was published, signed, and agreed to by all providers in the borough. As Figure 1 shows, the Plan was organized by the

themes of Every Child Matters and described the borough, its successes, and key priorities for the next three years (*Tower Hamlets Children and Young People’s Strategic Plan 2006–2009*, p. 21).

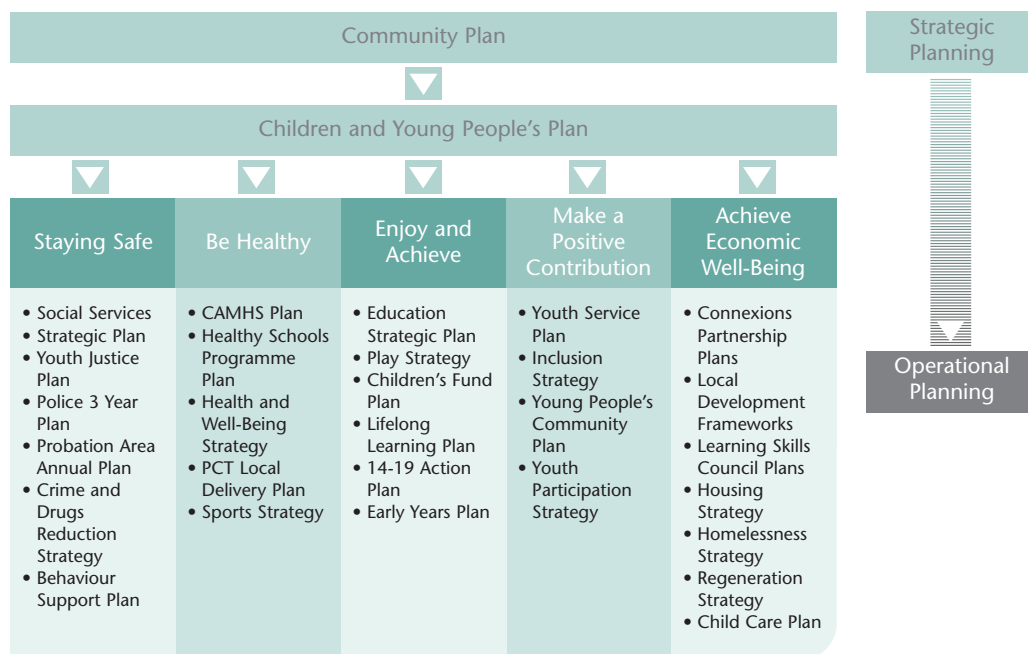


Figure 1. Tower Hamlets Children and Young People’s Plan themes

To facilitate coordination among a number of organizational bodies within Tower Hamlets, the Children and Young People’s Strategic Partnership Group was created to oversee the plan’s delivery. The group is chaired by Tower Hamlets Children’s Services and includes a number of community partners, including residents, head teachers, parent governors, young people, the local Learning and Skills Council, the Tower Hamlets Education Business Partnership, the police, and the health sector (Primary Care Trust, Mental Health Trust, and the Acute Trust).

In addition to the coordinated responsibility for public sector services in education, health, mental health, foster care, and safety, Tower Hamlets Children’s Services funds many locally based organizations in the voluntary sector, from community development corporations offering adult education to mosques and churches providing after-school programs. Partners, as well as young people themselves, are involved in devising and assessing service delivery plans.

Strengths and Challenges

Achievement across a Range of Indicators

The progress made by Tower Hamlets across a range of health, social, educational, and economic indicators is remarkable. In its 2007 update, the Tower Hamlets Partnership recognized reaching a number of ambitious targets for young people in the borough. For example, Children’s Services set a goal of achieving a 47 percent reduction from a 2000 baseline in the number of under-eighteen conceptions (pregnancies) by 2009. By 2007, the number of

conceptions had already fallen 25.3 percent since 1998, which places Tower Hamlets in the top quartile nationally for this indicator.

In education, there has been significant progress as well. By age eleven, children in Tower Hamlets are already achieving at a higher level than the national average in English and mathematics. Twenty-nine percent of schools inspected by the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services, and Skills (or Ofsted, the government inspector of schools) were rated as outstanding and more than two-thirds as good or better. The Key Stage 2–3 Transition Programme put in place in the borough, which “supports those at risk of social exclusion of secondary school,” has been awarded the Beacon Council Award for Early Intervention.

Vulnerable Children

However, significant challenges remain, especially for the borough’s most vulnerable children. Figure 2 shows that large numbers of vulnerable children are distributed across the array of targeted and specialist services from the borough (*Tower Hamlets Children and Young People’s Plan 2007*, p. 8). A vexing issue is that coordinated service delivery alone does not assure sufficient continuity of contact, engagement, and care for the most vulnerable children and their families.

For example, an at-risk child may have a number of different social workers over time, as well as a multitude of care providers. Collins emphasized the need to break down traditional boundaries among these services. He added that despite the clear and persistent focus on outcomes, significant gaps remain. These gaps “are not about character or capacity – the clearest correlation is wealth. How do we narrow those gaps?”

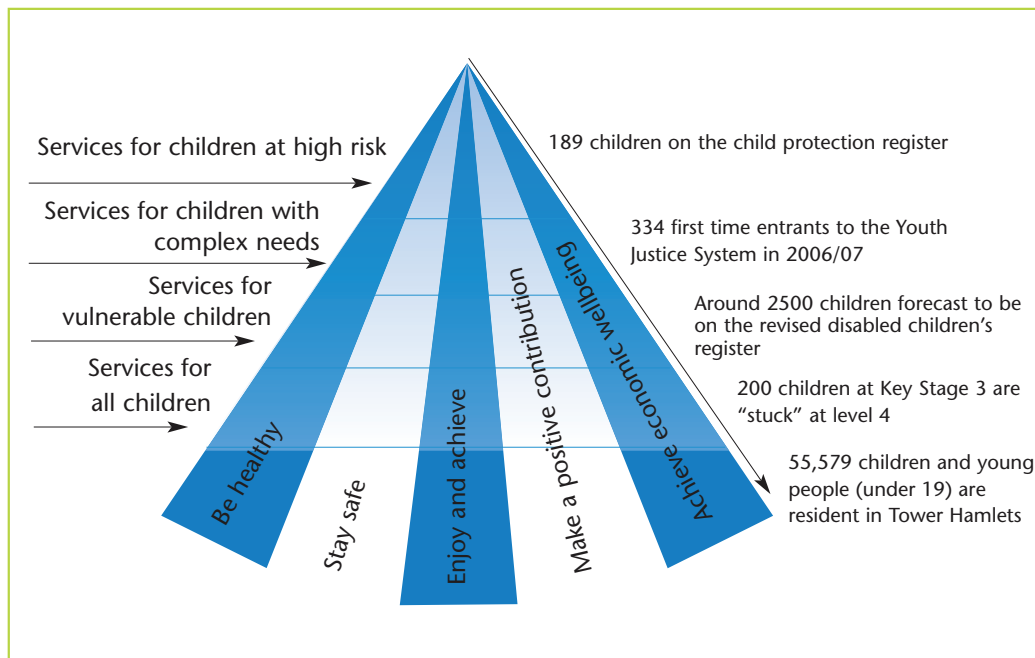


Figure 2. Distribution of vulnerable children across different levels of service needs

Political and Cultural Dimensions of Change

Many formal bureaucratic barriers have been broken down. For instance, Helen Jenner, service head for Early Years, Children and Learning, at Tower Hamlets and participant in the Annenberg Institute's 2008 Emerging Knowledge Forum, oversees all services offered for students from birth to age eleven. But challenges remain.

One challenge is managing the political and cultural dimensions of change of this magnitude. Kevan Collins notes that about a year into the Plan Children's Services underwent a complete restructuring of services at the top level to better reflect its priorities. Helen Jenner's role in leading all services for children from birth to eleven "was a way of bringing that together," Collins said, and an attempt to "look more holistically at children across that age frame."

At the top and grassroots levels, Collins indicated, this holistic approach has been embraced. But at the middle-management level, there has been a degree of fear about old expertise and old boundaries being challenged and broken down. "Middle-tier people have made a career in the old regime, and suddenly you're changing regime. That's where we still have a great deal of work to do," Collins said. To do that, it's "more than hearts and minds. You have to demonstrate in an evidence-based way that you've got a better approach," especially in a system and in a borough that has had a great deal of recent success in supporting the vast majority of children.

Shared Accountability

Another challenge has been in developing shared accountability among non-public sector partners. The intention of the Every Child Matters agenda was to create shared accountability. Collins noted some positive outcomes of that shared accountability. Ofsted quickly rewrote its inspection framework when the broader set of outcomes set by Every Child Matters was instituted. Now, a school's report is written against the Every Child Matters outcomes. And each local Children's Plan uses the same framework. Collins said it was "exciting to tie those together, and the alignment is useful."

It has also been helpful to take this statutory framework and apply it to organizations that are not statutory, such as general doctors, Collins said. Doctors are critical to building health, but are not subject to the same accountability as governmental authorities. Jenner noted that the move toward shared accountability has been a challenge for the voluntary sector, necessitating a shift in their missions to more of an outcome focus. This has not tended to be the focus of these organizations' work. However, shared accountability, according to Collins, is possible with shared vision and priorities. And though the accountability's reach is not yet complete, "that's moving."

References

Every Child Matters. Crown copyright 2003. Presented to Parliament by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury by Command of Her Majesty. Norwich, UK: The Stationery Office. Available online at <www.everychildmatters.gov.uk>

Every Child Matters: Change for Children. Crown copyright 2005. London, UK: HM Government, Department for Children, Schools and Families. Available online at <www.everychildmatters.gov.uk>

Tower Hamlets Children and Young People's Plan 2007: Annual Review and Update – Aiming High Together One Year On. 2007. London, UK: Tower Hamlets Partnership and Tower Hamlets.

Tower Hamlets Children and Young People's Strategic Plan 2006–2009: Aiming High Together. 2006. London, UK: Tower Hamlets Partnership and Tower Hamlets.

Discussion Questions

- How can cultural dimensions of change be managed within an organization that has experienced a number of successes, especially at the middle-management level?
- How do non-public sector partners develop shared accountability?
- How do partnerships not only reach, but close the gap for the most vulnerable children in the community?

Site Team Members

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For More Information

- Tower Hamlets: <www.towerhamlets.gov.uk>
- Every Child Matters: Change for Children: <www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/publications>
- Department for Children, Schools and Families: <www.dfes.gov.uk>
- The Learning and Skills Council: <www.dfes.gov.uk>
- Department of Education and Skills Innovation Unit: <www.innovation-unit.co.uk>