

Executive Mayor's Office

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29th June 2023

Dear Assembly Member Berry,

I am writing in reply to your letter dated 27 June. I share your deep concern about the complaints set out in your email. Any alleged mistreatment of residents by officers of the Council is taken extremely seriously, and must be investigated thoroughly and appropriately. When the allegations are racially-sensitive, as is the case here, the need to properly address them becomes all the more critical.

Following a series of allegations by women from the Somali community, I requested that the Council's Housing Department open an investigation into the departmental claims, overseen by the Director of Housing and other Senior Officers. I made it very clear that this internal investigation needed to consider and represent all the evidence submitted, and I have been requesting regular updates from the Head of Housing on this matter.

At the time of writing, no evidence has been submitted that demonstrates Council employees either racially discriminated against the women in the bidding process, or that offers were made to fast-track bids in exchange for money. Should any credible evidence of this nature surface, I can assure you in the strongest terms that the appropriate disciplinary and criminal steps would be sought.

Many of these women also raised concerns about their own individual cases. In fact, many will have attended a Town Hall meeting at the Council on 20th March 2023, which was held so we could hear their concerns and experiences. We ensured appropriate Council staff were at this meeting, including the Director of Housing and the Head of Complaints, to listen and offer support to families and individuals affected.

The Head of Complaints and Director of Housing offered support and pledged that any cases or concerns would be investigated via the council's formal complaints procedure. The Head of Complaints committed to creating some guidance for the attending families on how to easily navigate the complaints procedure, and to create custom simple complaints forms to make it easier for families to submit information and evidence. These documents were completed and were distributed at the end of



March 2023 via their representative. I have attached both for your reference. The Council also offered to translate these documents.

The Head of Complaints also explained at the Town Hall meeting that not only would this allow each and every case to have their own thorough investigation, but also provided assurances to all of the families that each formal complaint can be escalated if needed to an independent Ombudsman, stressing that the Council is an accountable public body that welcomes accountability and learning via complaints and the direction of a regulator when needed.

Since this offer of support to help families through the complaints process, the Council has successfully received a number of formal complaints from some of the Somali women, and these have been going through the procedure correctly. The Head of Complaints has also personally helped any families within the remit of his role when they have reached out to him, something he has personally encouraged them to do in perpetuity.

For those who have not yet submitted a formal complaint and evidence, they are still invited to do so, and the Head of Complaints will continue to offer them support and guidance to raise their complaint, which is the appropriate procedural channel for individual grievances. The instructions on how to do so are attached.

It should also be noted that in addition to the impact of a nationwide housing crisis, Tower Hamlets suffers from acute overcrowding as a borough. Damp and mould are two of the biggest and most damaging challenges arising from this. I personally host Mayor's surgeries twice weekly – Mondays and Fridays – in which I see around 500 residents every month, and damp and mould are a permanent feature of our discussions. I routinely communicate the disturbing physical and psychological consequences of this to Housing Officers; have written to our Housing Providers and Associations requesting full stock audits with a focus on damp and mould; and have also recently written to central government about overcrowding in Tower Hamlets.

We have 23,000 people on the housing waiting list in our borough. To try and alleviate some of this enormous demand, we have one of the most ambitious housebuilding targets in the country – 4,000 genuinely affordable by 2026. You will be all too familiar with the challenges facing housing development at the moment, with inflation pushing building costs upwards. But I am determined to meet our targets to help relieve waiting list pressures, and this relief will benefit all of our residents.

Returning again to the specific cohort in question, I am personally disturbed by their sense of marginalisation. This is not how anybody in Tower Hamlets – or anywhere, for that matter – should ever feel. To begin the process of addressing this wider issue (outside of the specific allegations, whose processes I've enumerated), I have tasked my office with hiring a Somali Advisor – someone embedded in the community whose role is to ensure it feels listened to and engaged with. I have also ensured that the Interim Chief Executive of the Council meets directly with the affected individuals and families to listen to their concerns. The Head of Complaints will also be attending this meeting in order to continue the offer of support for those who wish to have their concerns investigated. I am happy to report that both of these

attempts to address the underlying issues are being actioned imminently.

I hope this addresses some of your concerns. I am always happy to receive further queries on this or any other matter from your office.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lutfur Rahman'. The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name 'Lutfur' and the last name 'Rahman' clearly distinguishable.

Lutfur Rahman,
Executive Mayor of Tower Hamlets