Introduction

Rainbow Hamlets is a forum for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people who live, work or have other strong associations with the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. It was set up by Tower Hamlets Council in 2009 as a resource to support the local LGBT community in line with the Council’s Sexual Orientation Equality (SOE) Scheme (the Scheme) 2009-2012. However it is fully independent of the Council.

Terms of reference

Rainbow Hamlets’ terms of reference are derived largely from the Scheme. We aim to be the independent voice of LGBT people in Tower Hamlets in championing and celebrating the diverse lives, needs and experiences of LGBT people, community groups and LGBT businesses who live, work or are otherwise associated with the borough. We will do this by:-

- advocating on behalf of LGBT people, organisations and businesses with the local authority, the police and other agencies,
- building local community life, challenging homophobia and transphobia in all its forms,
- engaging with and encouraging meaningful consultation,
- proactively reviewing provision of service and grant allocation to ensure they are equitable, so that the allocation of public funds are inclusive of LGBT projects and initiatives, and are used to address gaps in community support.
- facilitating local historical, cultural, sporting and LGBT rights-related happenings that bring people together,
- developing dialogue with other communities in the borough, to promote understanding and combat hatred and prejudice in all its forms.
- linking up with LGBT people, groups and organisations across London and beyond.

A copy of the scheme can be found at Appendix 1 for reference purposes.

Governance

As a community forum, Rainbow Hamlets has the status of an unincorporated members association. A constitution has recently been drafted and will be put before the 2011 Annual General Meeting. A copy of the draft Constitution can be found at Appendix 2.
Officers

In May 2010 Rainbow Hamlets elected three co-chairs to preside over its meetings. These were Esther Sealy, Jack Gilbert and Rebecca Shaw. Jack and Rebecca are still in post. Esther stepped down in February 2011. The co-chairs receive no payment or benefit for performing their duties. Rainbow Hamlets has no other officers and employs no staff.

Membership

Rainbow Hamlets does not currently operate a formal membership scheme or maintain a register of members. Any LGBT person living, working or having strong associations with the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, and who attends Rainbow Hamlets forum meetings is deemed to be a de facto member of Rainbow Hamlets.

Forum meetings

Forum meetings are open to all community members and are also attended by employees from the constituent members of the One Tower Hamlets partnership, including the Metropolitan Police, the local NHS acute and primary care trusts, registered social landlords, and third sector organisations working with the LGBT community.

Activities during 2010/2011

It has been a busy year and relationships between LGBT people and the wider community has been a recurring theme. The appearance of “gay free zone” stickers across the borough in February and March invited close scrutiny of the relationship between LGBT people in Tower Hamlets and their Muslim neighbours. Pink News and other commentators quickly assumed a link between a huge increase homophobia and the influence of Islam.

We were concerned that LGBT people in Tower Hamlets would be implicated in a media-based islamophobic narrative and would become further marginalised within the community. We issued a press release calling for a more moderate and informed approach and worked with the Council and members of the interfaith forum towards a cohesive and community based response. Further press releases followed in which the Mayor of Tower Hamlets, the chair of the interfaith forum, the director of East London Mosque, the Borough Commander and Rainbow Hamlets issued a joint statement condemning homophobia. Rainbow Hamlets also condemned the anti-Islamic sentiment expressed in the press.
Our own research and consultation demonstrated to us that although homophobia was increasing in Tower Hamlets, it was by no means as pervasive as the media had portrayed it. In addition the data provided by the police at the time did not support the conclusion that homophobic crime could be attributed entirely to the influence of a single faith group. About 50% of reported incidents were perpetrated by young Asian males. We reported these facts to the online, local and national print media and to the BBC. However populist opinion outside the borough remained heavily in favour of a blanket condemnation of Islam and Rainbow Hamlets attracted heavy criticism for its response. In March news broke that a young Muslim man found in possession of four stickers had been arrested and released without charge. There was an immediate call on Facebook for a Pride Event to ‘reclaim the space’ we had lost. Within days screenshots indicating EDL recruitment and support were passed to us.

Having consulted with LGBT people within the borough, there was a strong consensus that we could not permit a Pride march with the explicit support of the English Defence League (EDL) to take place in Tower Hamlets. Working with Imaan, an organisation for gay Muslims, and other organisations opposed to the EDL, we investigated the backgrounds of those leading the march and discovered that the primary leader was a former member of the EDL who had been part of the leadership of that organisation and who still retained its core values, despite disagreement with his colleagues over the direction in which the EDL was heading. Indeed he admitted membership of other racist campaigns. Evidence of this was covered in the community, local and national media, and the event was called off. However many influential people duped into supporting the event resented the exposure of the far right links and our role in that process. In some cases those resentments still seem to exist.

In May we hosted a conference at Toynbee Hall to mark the International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO) to consider the relationship between sexuality, faith and homophobia. This was an event we had been planning during March and April as a more reasoned response to the distribution and publication of the gay free zone stickers. It was attended by leaders from the Jewish and Christian faiths, local residents, and secular and faith based organisations within Tower Hamlets and was addressed by the Mayor of Tower Hamlets. However despite initially supporting the event, leaders from East London Mosque did not feel able to participate. We found this disappointing but the conference was generally well received by those present. We began to meet privately with the mosque’s leadership to discuss how we could improve community relations.
In June the conviction and sentencing of Mohammed Hasnath for posting “gay free zone” stickers on the transport networks drew further attention towards perceived community tensions. We were very critical of the British Transport Police’s investigation and subsequent low level charge, a position vindicated by the judge’s comments, assigning him an intent to cause distress.

We have continued to challenge the ELM/LMC leadership to address incidence homophobic hate preaching and the attendance of such preachers at functions at ELM/LMC. We were able to comment further on the matter through a substantial article written by Jack for the Guardian. We have asked the leaders of the mosque to produce a copy of the policy which they claim to have developed to prevent recurrences of homophobic hate preaching at the mosque. We have also invited them to comment on the reported appearance at the mosque since 2008 of up to ten preachers known for their extreme homophobic views and their current position towards those preachers. We are awaiting their response.

During July and August we were heavily involved in a community-based response to the news that the EDL intended to demonstrate in Tower Hamlets in September. The response formulated by a local coalition called United East End consisting of community leaders, including ourselves, and of faith leaders and trade union representatives was to petition the local authority, the police and the Home Secretary in support of a ban on such a demonstration and also, with the support of Unite Against Facism, to arrange a community event by way of counter demonstration. Rebecca spoke publicly at a full Council meeting and at a rally at the London Muslim Centre, stressing that the EDL did not speak for LGBT people in Tower Hamlets.

The Home Secretary consented to a ban on all demonstrations in Tower Hamlets and five other local authorities in London for a period of 30 days and the Council withdrew its support for a community based anti-EDL event in Weavers Field. However the ban did not affect common law rights of assembly and so the EDL held a static protest on the boundary of the borough on 3 September and an opposing protest took place on Whitechapel Road at the same time. We were not engaged with United East End in making arrangements for the static demonstration. This concerned us and we felt unable to commend it as a safe event for LGBT people to attend and declined to. However we participated fully in community dialogues about policing the event both through the Council’s Community Cohesion, Contingency Planning and Community Tension Monitoring Group (CCCPTMG) and through the Borough Commander’s Independent Advisory Group (IAG). Jack served as an adviser to the Metropolitan Police Gold Command on 3 September.
Although the management of community relationships has occupied a significant part of our time, we have endeavoured not to let it monopolise us. Since June we have been working towards a **Pride Event** in East London on 24 September. The event will be hosted by an independent body called East London Pride which has been constituted with the support of Rainbow Hamlets and other LGBT people in the area. There are two constituent elements to the event; a march from Hackney Town Hall to Oxford House in Bethnal Green and a community festival at Oxford House. This will be a fully inclusive event and we commend it to all LGBT people in Tower Hamlets. We look forward to seeing it as a continuing fixture in our calendar.

We have participated in a number of community consultation exercises undertaken by the Council. Subjects include the **Mayor’s budget**, the Council’s **Licencing Policy**, business support for **small and medium enterprises** (SMEs), the Council’s **local implementation scheme** to support the Mayor of London’s transport strategy, and the Council’s **Gender Equality Scheme** in which we made a significant contribution on transgender issues.

We have had little opportunity to engage directly in community outreach, but we see this as a future opportunity. This year we have sought to develop links with Age Concern’s **Opening Doors Project**, which offers both a monthly drop-in and a monthly dinner club for older members of the LGBT community. Jack and Esther attended a day conference exploring the theme of the social isolation experienced by older community members. We have also assisted **London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard** by providing a transgender awareness training session.

Because Rainbow Hamlets has no funding, we have spent considerable time exploring **funding opportunities**. We have applied for funding to set up a virtual community resource to facilitate interaction between members of the community. We were initially offered a grant of £4,500 by the **Change Up Consortium**, but for reasons which are not clear to us, the **Cultural Industries Development Agency** (CIDA) which administers funding for the consortium now denies that funding has been agreed. This is a matter we are progressing formally by way of complaint to the Big Lottery Fund.

During the year we have endeavoured to properly constitute Rainbow Hamlets. This has now been achieved; our **articles of association** were formally agreed at an EGM in August. We feel they offer us the potential to continue to grow over the next 12 months.
In addition to Rainbow Hamlets, CCCPTMG and IAG meetings we have regularly attended and contributed to meetings of the **Tower Hamlets No Place for Hate Forum** (NPFH). These meetings provide us with a valuable opportunity to explore the impact of hate crime upon our borough and discuss how we can address it. At one meeting we explained how the police investigation into the dissemination of the “gay free zone” stickers and subsequent prosecution of Mohammed Hasnath had highlighted inequalities within existing hate crime legislation which worked to the disadvantage of LGBT people. Independently of that, we expressed our dissatisfaction with the way the prosecution of Mohammed Hasnath had been handled by the **Crown Prosecution Service** (CPS). We met with the Legal Director for CPS London in June and have arranged to attend the CPS Hate Crime panel in October as observers when the Hasnath case falls to be reviewed.

**The Way Forward**

This year has highlighted the need for an organisation like Rainbow Hamlets in the borough but has clearly demonstrated to us that current arrangements are unsustainable. The three co-chairs received no recompense for expenses incurred in attending meetings and representing LGBT people. This cannot continue. Moreover the workload has been substantially more than its current leadership can bear alone. This year we need to see more people involved in Rainbow Hamlets if it is to make any impact on the issues affecting LGBT people in the borough.

2012 invites further focus on Tower Hamlets. The **Olympic Games** will brings thousands of visitors to the borough, some of whom will identify as LGBT. We need to find ways of engaging with them. In addition, the Council’s **SOE** runs its course in 2012 and we need to evaluate its successes and challenge the Council on its failings. We do not accept the premise that budget cuts have not had a disproportionately adverse affect upon LGBT people. In 2012 we want to see more evidence of the Council’s commitment towards celebrating LGBT diversity and the lives of its LGBT people.

Above all there remains a fundamental need for us to engage more effectively with members of our own community in Tower Hamlets. There are organisations delivering services to LGBT people in Tower Hamlets and we need to be in dialogue with them to find out how we can support them in the valuable work they do on our behalf. We also need to find out what the needs of LGBT people in Tower Hamlets actually are. We see an online resource as an important part of that process.
Finally we must do more to challenge the perception that LGBT people are an invisible part of the community. There are no LGBT monuments, the only LGBT places are commercial venues and these are declining.

**Acknowledgements**

As co-chairs of Rainbow Hamlets, we feel we can look back with some satisfaction at the work we have done on behalf of LGBT people in Tower Hamlets during our term of office. We would like to acknowledge the contribution of our former co-chair Esther Sealy. We would also like to register our appreciation of the support we have received from staff of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, and in particular Rob Driver, Frances Jones and former staff members Hafsha Ali and David Sommerfeld. Similarly we are grateful for the assistance we have received from the Metropolitan Police, our liaison officer PC Melanie Conneely and Chief Superintendent Mark Wolski who is now based in West London. Thanks go also to James Caspell of Tower Hamlets Homes, Christine Sheppard of Age UK and Sangeeta Kundra from NHS Tower Hamlets all of whom have been regular attenders at our meetings and have been happy to engage with us when we have called upon them. However we feel there is still much to be done.

**Jack Gilbert**  
**Rebecca Shaw**

September 2011