

CASE STUDY

TOWER HAMLETS

Growing a shared culture of trauma-informed practice



About

Trauma Informed London is a project commissioned by London's VRU in collaboration with Dartington Service Design Lab and Friendship



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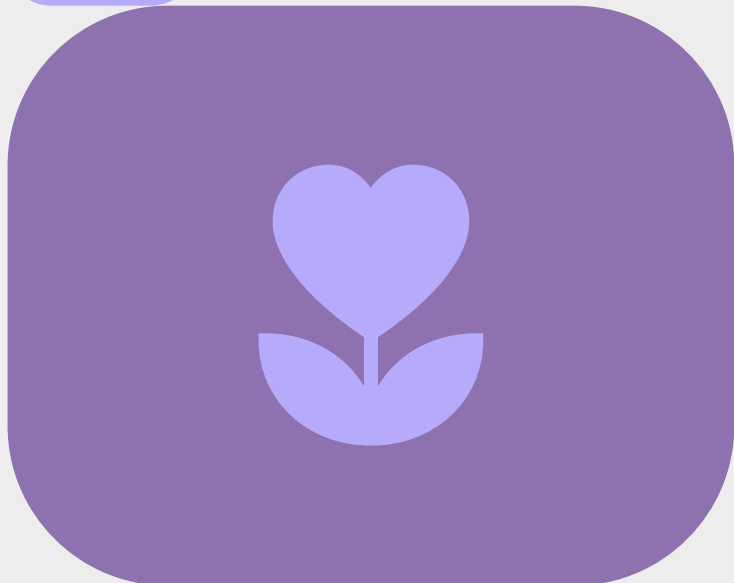
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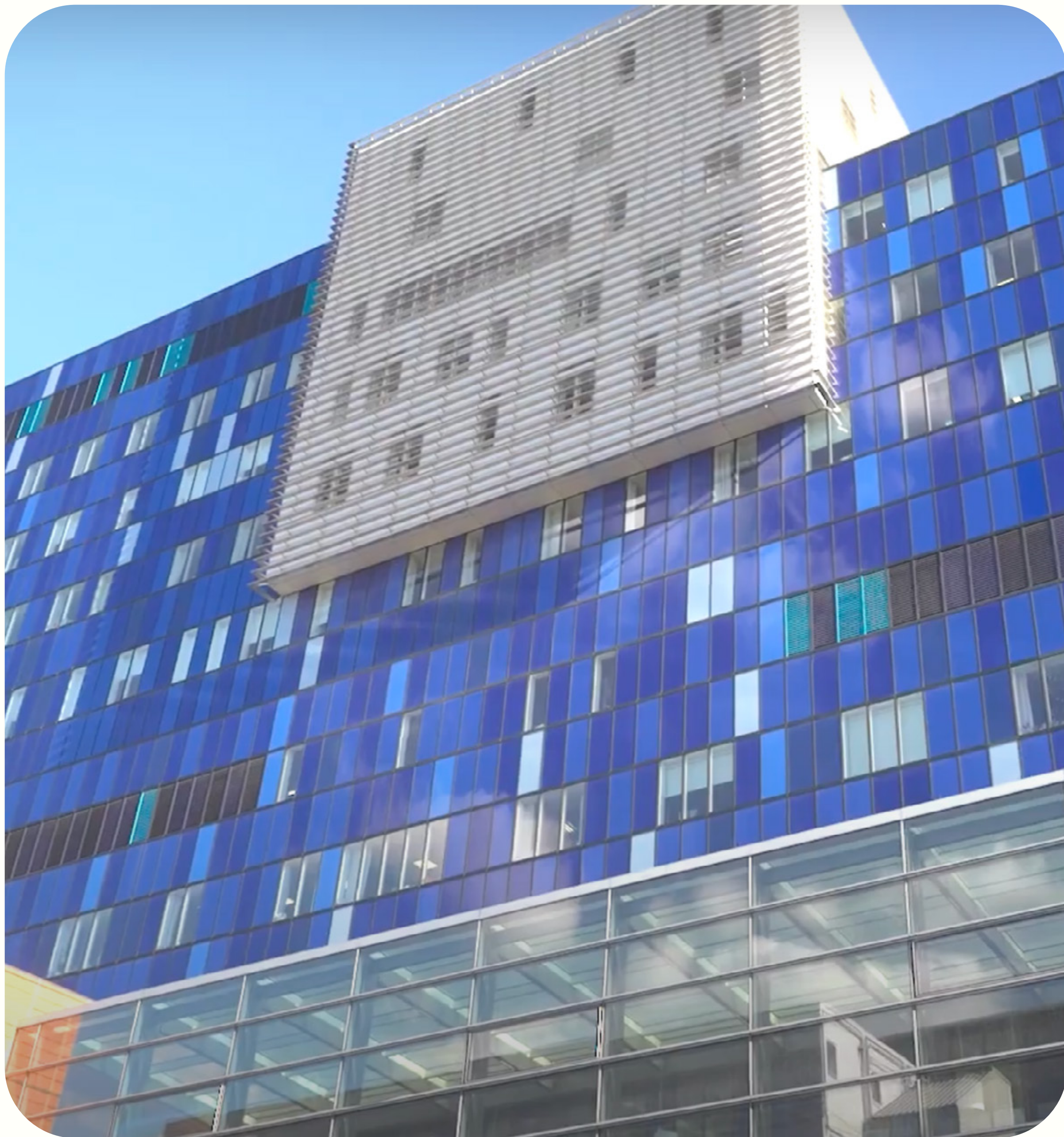
INTRO

Tower Hamlets has been on a journey to become a 'trauma-informed' borough, with the vision that 'our services will avoid re-traumatisation and increase access for people impacted by trauma'.

The Tower Hamlets Together partnership, (which brings together health and social care organisations to improve the health and wellbeing of people living in the borough), supports training and hosts a Community of Practice, which is a virtual space for people across the borough to explore trauma and trauma-informed practice through sharing learning and resources in ongoing regular events and a resource library.

This case study demonstrates the power of practitioner-driven initiatives like Communities of Practice to create meaningful impact by fostering opportunities for cross-sector shared learning. Gathering resources, convening practitioners and community members and providing spaces to platform training and share skills all help to support reflection and development in ways that can meet individuals where they are at for self-led learning.





CONTEXT

Interest in trauma-informed approaches began to emerge in Tower Hamlets local authority around 2019, as a response to growing concerns about staff wellbeing and the emotional toll of direct practice. During this time, a small group of public health practitioners began to explore how trauma could be addressed not just clinically, but as a shared, community-wide concern.

There was no formal programme or funding at the outset—just a shared recognition that something needed to change.

“We convened a small group,” one practitioner recalled, **“and really tried to think about what we could do, even though we had no resources.”** This early collaboration laid the groundwork for a borough-wide movement rooted in connection, reflection, and shared learning.

By 2021, this grassroots momentum was bolstered by support from the Prevention and Promotion for Better Mental Health Fund, which enabled the expansion of

trauma-informed practice across Tower Hamlets. The Council invested in a borough-wide training programme and launched service improvement pilots in maternity care, housing, and employment services. These initiatives aimed to embed trauma-informed principles into everyday practice, while also building a shared language and understanding across sectors.

This open, collaborative foundation laid the groundwork for a long-running Community of Practice—one that continues to evolve, bringing together people from across sectors to learn, reflect, and grow together.

From the beginning, the Tower Hamlets initiative was guided by a few simple but powerful aims.



The first was to create a space where anyone from across the borough, regardless of role or background and including community members, could come together to explore trauma-informed practice. **"It wasn't organised around a population other than Tower Hamlets,"** a facilitator of the group reflected, "that was the only shared thing."

The second was to build bridges between sectors, such as health, education, housing, social care and the voluntary and community sector (VCS), fostering collaboration and mutual understanding. And the third was to support staff wellbeing in meaningful ways, recognising the emotional demands of working in high-pressure environments.

Rather than prescribing a model or delivering a fixed programme, the group focused on building a culture—one rooted in shared values, reflective practice, and a commitment to learning together.

***“WE CONVENED A SMALL GROUP,
AND REALLY TRIED TO THINK
ABOUT WHAT WE COULD DO, EVEN
THOUGH WE HAD NO RESOURCES.”***

Practitioner

Actions

ACTIONS

Community of practice group

The first Community of Practice session was held in 2021 as an informal, open space shaped by those who attended. Open to anyone connected to Tower Hamlets, regardless of profession or organisation, the group encourages contributions from residents, service users, VCS, and professionals alike. Over time, these monthly gatherings became a consistent space to share learning, hear from others across the borough and beyond, and reflect on how trauma-informed principles could be applied in real-world contexts.

"What we've ended up with," a group facilitator described, **"is a nice mix of local services sharing what they're doing and then inviting people from across the country to talk about what they're doing."**

The group has grown into a dynamic, cross-sector forum that now includes professionals from health, education, housing, social care, and the VCS, as well as ad hoc participants. Sessions

are facilitated but flexible, allowing space for both structured input and open discussion. Insights from those discussions are saved as an [open access resource](#). This adaptability has helped sustain engagement and relevance, even as the landscape of trauma-informed work continues to evolve.

The Community of Practice has become **"a key mechanism for embedding trauma-informed principles across the system,"** offering a rare opportunity for practitioners to connect across organisational boundaries and reflect on shared challenges and learning.

What is a community of practice?





ACTIONS

Quarterly reflective space to support wellbeing

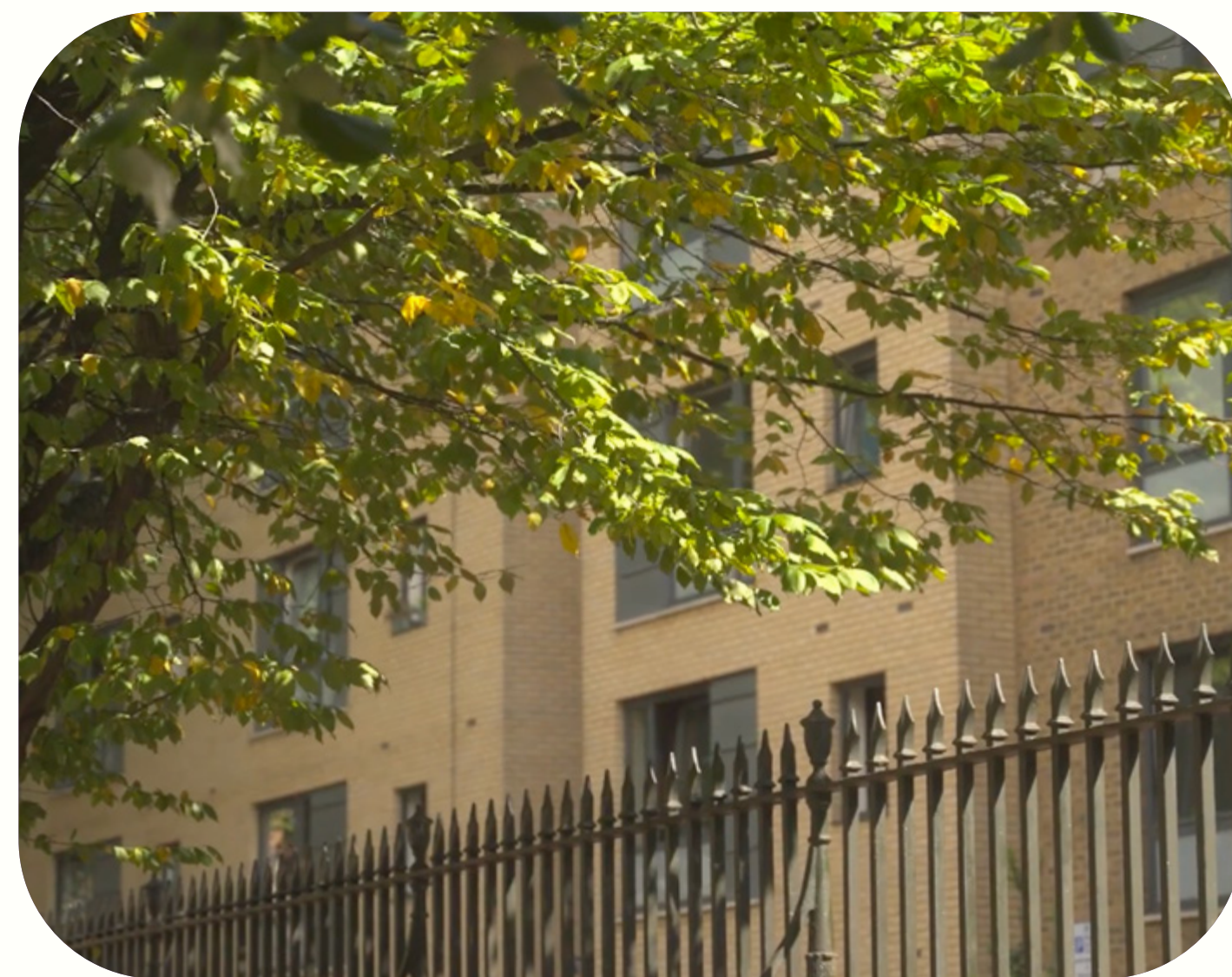
Alongside the Community of Practice, a quarterly reflective space was introduced to provide a more personal and supportive space for local authority practitioners. These sessions were created in response to the emotional demands of frontline work, particularly during the pandemic. They offered a space for staff at all levels to pause, process, and reconnect with their own wellbeing, ensuring that staff and services didn't feel alone. Unlike traditional reflective practice groups, these sessions were deliberately unstructured and open. Attendance varied, and the group was never fixed.

"They've never had the same people in them," one practitioner noted. **"Some people have always been there, some have come to a few—it's not a closed**

group, which makes it quite different from a workplace reflective practice group usually organised around a team."

Initially introduced as a trial, the reflective space has since become a valued part of the trauma-informed approach. It fosters cross-organisational relationships and supports a culture of care—one that recognises the emotional labour of trauma-informed work and prioritises the wellbeing of those delivering it.

"In some ways, it's doing trauma-informed practice," one participant reflected, **"thinking about how the work affects my ability to do the work, rather than just sharing the work itself."**





ACTIONS

Universal trauma-informed training for practitioners

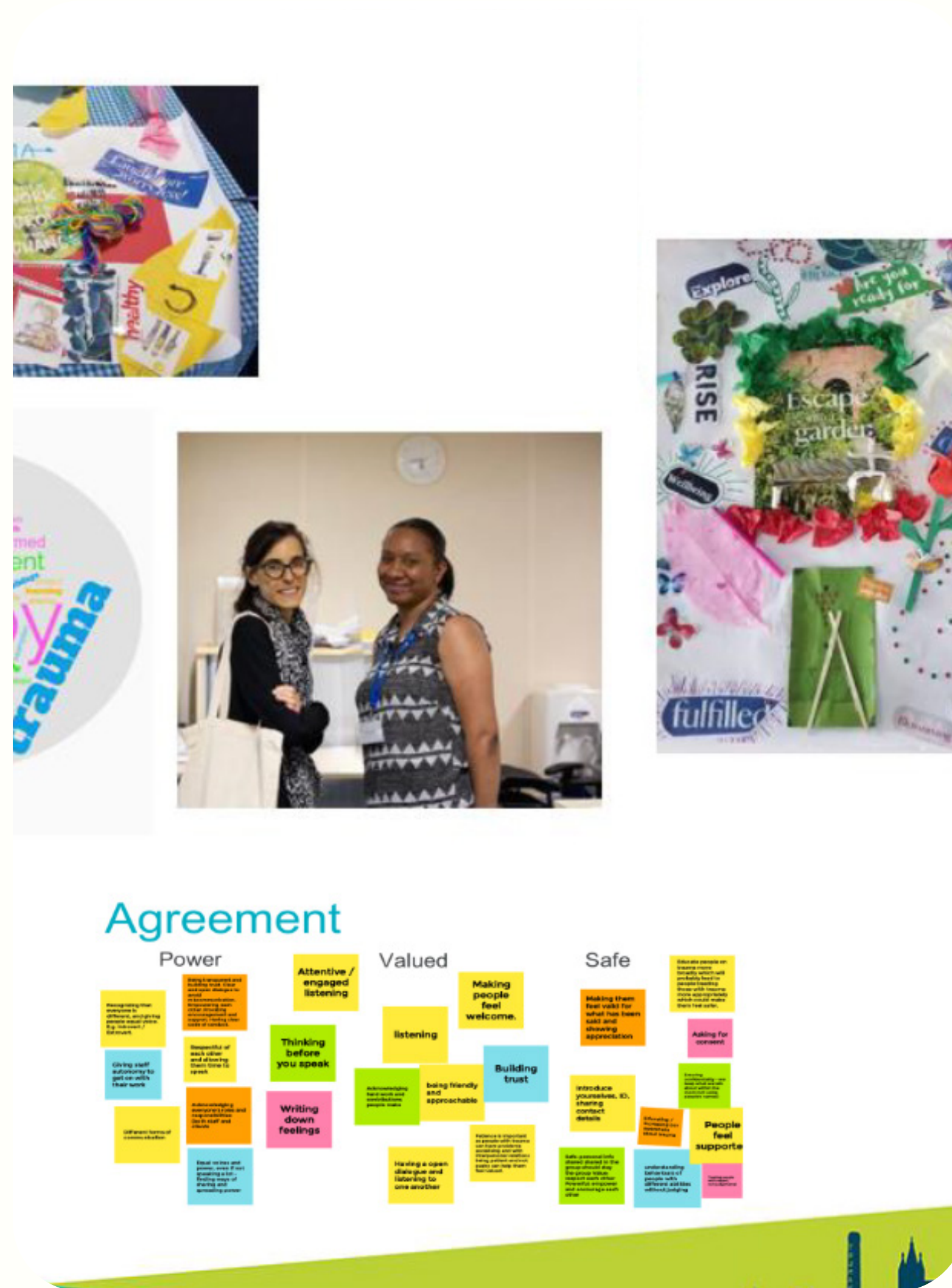
To support consistency across the system, a universal trauma-informed training offer was introduced for all practitioners working with families, including participants from health and social care, the voluntary sector, community safety and housing. The training was co-designed with input from local practitioners and delivered in partnership with external experts. It covered core principles of trauma-informed practice, the impact of trauma on individuals and communities, and practical strategies for embedding these principles into everyday work.

This training **“helped to create a common language and understanding across services,”** and observed improvement in knowledge of trauma and trauma-informed practice, which in turn strengthened consistency and improved the quality of support offered to residents.

By aligning training with the work of the Community of Practice and Reflective Space,

Tower Hamlets created a multi-layered approach to embedding trauma-informed practice—one that supports both individual learning and systemic change.

Outcomes



OUTCOMES

Widespread engagement in training

Between 2021 and 2022, over 1,000 professionals across Tower Hamlets attended online training sessions on trauma and trauma-informed approaches—including both general and sector-specific sessions. Participants came from a wide range of sectors, including healthcare, VCS, community safety, and housing. Feedback on the sessions was overwhelmingly positive, with evaluation findings showing

increased awareness, confidence, and commitment among staff to embed trauma-informed practice in their day-to-day work (University of East London, 2022).

OUTCOMES

Culture shift

Over time, the impact of the training and reflective spaces created through the Communities of Practice and pilot initiatives began to show. Practitioners across Tower Hamlets started using a shared language to describe what they were doing. **"There were things we were already doing,"** someone said, **"we just didn't have a name for them."** The training and reflective spaces helped give those practices shape, meaning, and greater purpose. Being able to name and collectively describe what good practice means through the framework of trauma-informed practice also supports alignment within and across different sectors of practice, leading to deeper understanding and impact across wider systemic cultures.

Other changes in practice included improvements in how practitioners were better able to relate to clients, and to each other. There was more compassion, more patience, more space to pause and think. The work also helped build bridges between sectors, creating new relationships and networks that hadn't existed before.

An evaluation of the efforts to embed trauma-informed practice have also highlighted a "culture shift" in how trauma and wellbeing were understood across the borough. Practitioners reported feeling more confident in applying trauma-informed principles, and more connected to others doing similar work. One participant described it as **"a shift from working in silos to working in solidarity."**

OUTCOMES

Supported resilience

Importantly, the initiative also helped surface and validate the emotional labour of frontline work. By creating space for reflection and connection, it supported not just professional development, but personal resilience. **"It's about being 'us and us,' not 'us and them,'"** one practitioner reflected. That sense of shared purpose became a quiet but powerful force for change.

Overall, there is growing recognition of trauma-informed approaches across the borough. References to trauma-informed principles are increasingly common, and there is stronger alignment with values such as co-production, inclusion, and community engagement. While this work is still evolving, it has already laid strong foundations for a more connected, compassionate, and trauma-informed system, that recognises the lived experience of both those delivering and receiving services.

Insights



01

The Tower Hamlets experience shows that trauma-informed practice is a sustained, evolving process rather than a one-off intervention. It demands long-term commitment, even when progress is slow or uncertain. With no fixed model, change is often non-linear and shaped by context. A shared definition and universal training provide a critical foundation for deepening trauma-informed work. The Community of Practice reinforces this by fostering ongoing reflection and learning, creating a culture that values both progress and setbacks.



02

A key lesson from this work is that **trauma-informed practice must be context-informed and responsive to social and relational dynamics.** Practitioners emphasised the importance of feeling safe, having time to reflect with other people living and working locally, and working within teams that share a common purpose.

“THERE WERE THINGS WE WERE ALREADY DOING, WE JUST DIDN’T HAVE A NAME FOR THEM.”

Practitioner

03

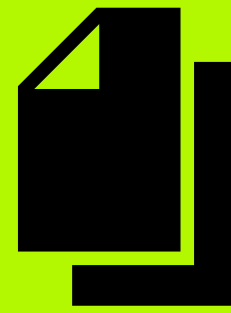
Tower Hamlets emphasised **that trauma-informed practice is fundamentally relational, and built on trust, empathy, and mutual support.** Safe, reflective spaces have been vital in supporting staff wellbeing and fostering cross-sector connection. Sharing learning and practice reflections across services and organisations is also essential, but challenges persist with creating and maintaining these spaces due to the need for adequate time and resources. Leadership can support the facilitation of this through everyday actions that model care, consistency, and reflection, but challenges and pressures related to governance, bureaucracy and different ways of working can sometimes hinder systemic buy-in.



Lessons

LESSONS

Shared resources



Community of Practice Group and Padlet for shared resources

Driver/s of change

Culture of curiosity

Outcomes

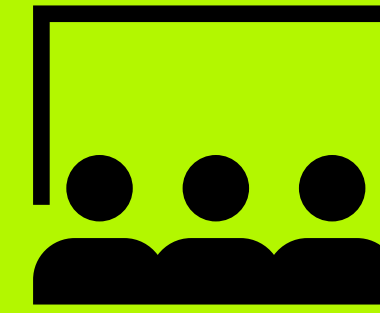
Open access opportunity to connect across organisational boundaries and reflect on shared challenges and learning

Building of bridges between sectors, creating new relationships and networks that hadn't existed before

Open access platform to share knowledge and update learning

LESSONS

Training for practitioners



Universal Trauma-Informed Training for Practitioners

Driver/s of change

Re-imagining practice

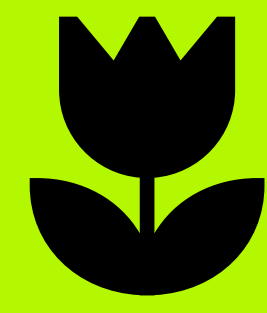
Outcomes

Development of a shared understanding of trauma-informed language and concepts, helping to create coherence in how services engage with trauma across the borough

Over 1000 people working across Tower Hamlets have attended a session of training

LESSONS

Support wellbeing



Quarterly Reflective Space to Support Wellbeing

Driver/s of change

Supporting Psychological Safety

Outcomes

Fosters cross-organisational relationships and a culture of care that recognises the emotional labour of trauma-informed work, prioritising the wellbeing of those delivering it

Cultivates a shared purpose that supports both professional development and personal resilience; promoting a mindset of "us and us," rather than "us and them."

Resources

Practical resources

Tower Hamlets Trauma-Informed Community of Practice Padlet Resources: <https://padlet.com/towerhamletstraumainformed>

Citations

Sharpe, D., Morocza, N., Syed, A., Canitrot, D., Narayan, V., Alloh, F., Galicia Mesa, L. P., & Hanafiah, A. (2022). Prevention and Promotion for Better Mental Health Fund: Evaluation of Projects to Support a Borough-Wide Trauma-Informed Initiative in Tower Hamlets. University of East London.

