A litany of failures from Tower Hamlets Council, Mayor John Biggs, MET Police and Bethnal Green Academy that led to the Bethnal Green schoolgirls to join ISIS in 2015

The ‘catastrophic’ failures by authorities in discharging their duty of care towards children vis-à-vis eight Bethnal Green Academy schoolgirls who were actively groomed by ISIS to leave Britain and go to Syria raises serious questions. Four schoolgirls managed to successfully enter ISIS territory.

The key authorities involved in the multitude of failures include the Tower Hamlets Council and its elected Mayor John Biggs, the Bethnal Green Academy and the Metropolitan Police.

Top Lines

- To date, Tower Hamlets Council led by Mayor John Biggs has failed to conduct a Serious Case Review – this is severe negligence
- Khadiza Sultana died in Syria in 2016 yet this did not trigger a Serious Case Review
- Tower Hamlets Council’s Children Services was deemed in ‘inadequate’ by Ofsted inspection in 2017

Tasnime Akunjee, the lawyer representing the Begum family, said:

“It is almost inconceivable that to date no agency has been investigated let alone held to account for the litany of failures that resulted in the Bethnal Green schoolgirls managing to travel to ISIS.

“To my knowledge, neither the Begum family nor any of the other families affected have ever been contacted as part of a formal inquiry that led to these failures. We need an urgent inquiry into how Shamima Begum ended up in Syria along with her school friends.

“There are serious questions that Tower Hamlets Council along with its Mayor John Biggs, the Police and the former leadership of the Bethnal Green Academy must answer for.”

Dal Babu, former MET Police chief superintendent, speaking on the failures said:

“It was shocking to learn that actions taken by the police and the failure of the school led to the Bethnal Green schoolgirls joining ISIS. The school failed to explain the seriousness of the situation to the parents and also what an appropriate adult meant when they assumed that role.

“This has been a catastrophic failure in safeguarding. It is extremely concerning that there has been no independent review and nothing to suggest that lessons have been learned or that safeguards have been put in place to ever stop this happening again.”

Background Information
Tower Hamlets Council

Tower Hamlets Council in the case of the Bethnal Green Schoolgirls, Sharmeena Begum, Shamima Begum, Amira Abas and Khadiza Sultana it has failed in all its responsibilities towards safeguarding them and its duty of care, and then tried to cover up its failings, which an internal investigation would have uncovered.

A Serious Case Review (SCR) is a locally conducted multi-agency review in circumstances where a child has been abused or neglected, resulting in serious harm or death and there is cause for concern as to the way in which the relevant authority or persons have worked together to safeguard the child. Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) are set up by local authorities in accordance with section 13 of the Children Act 2004. Regulation 5 of the Local Safeguarding Children Boards Regulations 2006 sets out the functions of LSCBs. This includes the requirement for LSCBs to undertake reviews of serious cases in specified circumstances, such as when a “child has died” or “child has been seriously harmed and there is cause for concern as to the way in which the authority, their Board partners or other relevant persons have worked together to safeguard the child.” (Source: Children Act 2004, Section 13, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/31/section/13)

In similar circumstances, in Brighton, a serious case review was carried out when two brothers died in Syria, 2014. (Source: Brighton Local Safeguarding Board, 2017, https://www.brightonandhovelscb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/BHLSCB-PRELEASE-FINAL.pdf)

1. To date, there has been no serious case review conducted by the Tower Hamlets Safeguarding Children's Board into the grooming of the Bethnal Green Academy (BGA) schoolgirls. None of its serious case reviews mentions the BGA schoolgirls or if there were any learning outcomes from the case. Source: http://www.childrenandfamiliestrust.co.uk/the-lscb/serious-case-reviews/

2. Sources within the Tower Hamlets Council have confirmed that a serious case review was never carried out nor was a safeguarding plan ever put in place.

3. At the very least, a SCR should have been triggered when Khadiza Sultana died in an airstrike in Syria during 2016. Source: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/aug/11/london-schoolgirl-kadiza-sultana-who-joined-isis-believed-killed-in-syria-airstrike

4. Tower Hamlets Children Services has been branded as “inadequate” by Ofsted. However, the Ofsted inspection makes no mention of the failings by Tower Hamlets Children Services in their duty to safeguard the BGA schoolgirls. Source: https://files.api.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/2753062

5. The Tower Hamlets Council Prevent programme failed in carrying out its duty to conduct risk assessments of how Shareema Begum’s radicalisation would impact her friends, Shamima, Amira and Khadiza. The Prevent manager at the time, Nojumul Hussain, said to Vice News: “[Counter-terrorism command] SO15 did [the investigation] how they wanted to do it... No risk assessments were done around how they could support other students who came into contact with the girl.” Source: https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/9kve5e/families-of-islamic-state-bound-schoolgirls-say-uk-police-let-them-walk-out

6. Tower Hamlets Council and its Children's Services department have not reached out to offer any support or assistance to the families of the BGA schoolgirls, nor have
they reached out to speak with Mr Akunjee the lawyer who was acting as a lawyer on behalf of the families at the time.

MET Police
1. The MET Police’s counter-terrorism department’s (SO15) inadequate handling of the BGA schoolgirls case is one of the key reasons that Shamima, Amira and Khadiza were pushed towards joining their friend Sharmeena in Syria.
2. While counter-terrorism police interviewed the schoolgirls over the disappearance of their friend (Sharmeena Begum) who left for Syria in December 2014, they failed to directly notify the parents of the schoolgirls that these preliminary interviews were taking place in the school.
3. A letter (dated 2 Feb 2015) was handed to the schoolgirls by the police to pass onto their parents expressing that the police wanted to take a statement from the girls – the parents never received this letter. This letter acted as a catalyst for the schoolgirls to act and to leave the UK. Source: Vice News, March 2015, https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/9kve5e/families-of-islamic-state-bound-schoolgirls-say-uk-police-let-them-walk-out
4. The MET Police had issued a press release on the 7 March 2015 saying that they had informed the families about the investigation in December 2014, which they later retracted. Source: Express, March 2015, https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/562747/Met-Police-apologise-Bethnal-Green-girls-Isis
5. Former MET Commissioner, Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, admitted their failures to the Parliamentary Home Affairs Select Committee and later apologised to the schoolgirls’ families. Furthermore, he acknowledged that they were “victims” of grooming. Source: BBC News, March 2015, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-31820783
6. The police saw the family members as potential suspects in the radicalisation of the young girls, which would have been the primary driver in not notifying the families the details of the on-going counter-terrorism investigation.

Tower Hamlets Mayor John Biggs
1. John Biggs became Mayor of Tower Hamlets in June 2015, amid the backdrop of a Council in crisis. The narrative has been supported by the media, that the Council under his competent leadership has come out of the crisis. This narrative has been accepted without any serious questioning by external bodies or the media.
2. This lack of scrutiny has allowed a culture of complacency to develop in the local authority. This case sheds to light, that the Council is still in crisis, due to the fact that no Serious Case Review has been carried out. This has not been picked up by the media, nor the Government Appointed Commissioners, or more importantly by Ofsted.
4. Unlike other issues, Mayor John Biggs, cannot point this failure of corporate parenting at the previous administration, this case started at his watch at the Council and still continues, to this date the families have not been contacted, a serious case review has not been carried out and lessons have not been learnt.
5. Mayor John Biggs has never reached out to the families of the BGA schoolgirls to offer any advice or assistance from the local authority, or indeed to learn any lessons from the case.

Bethnal Green Academy
1. The Bethnal Green Academy (BGA), led by now-disgraced headteacher, Mark Keary, allowed the assumed role of an appropriate adult when the BGA schoolgirls were interviewed by Met counter-terrorism police (SO15). Source: BBC News, Feb 2017, [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-38929737](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-38929737)
2. The Police and the BGA manipulated parents who were unaware of their rights as to who can act as an appropriate adult for the children who were being questioned by the Police.
3. The school never informed the parents in February 2015, as to why the Police wanted to speak with the young girls nor mentioned to them that a ‘missing persons’ case had then become an issue about radicalisation. Source: Home Affairs Select Committee, Nov 2015, [https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/home-affairs-committee/news-parliament-2015/151113-countering-extremism-evidence/](https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/home-affairs-committee/news-parliament-2015/151113-countering-extremism-evidence/)
4. At the height of the issues in 2015, BGA hired two city law firms to protect its reputation knowing that it could be facing a legal challenge over its handling and discharging of safeguarding responsibilities as an appropriate adult for the BGA schoolgirls.

Notes to editors

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- To speak with Mr Dal Babu, former MET Police chief superintendent, please email: dalbabu@aol.com or call: 07825907624