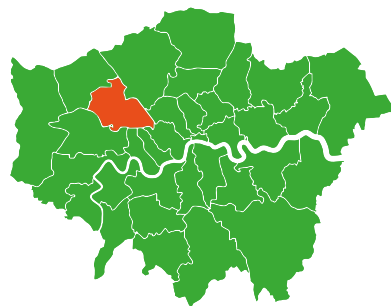




# A FAIRER FUTURE

## Ending Poverty in Brent

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE BRENT POVERTY COMMISSION JULY 2020







## Foreword - Cllr Eleanor Southwood



I am delighted to welcome the report of Brent's Independent Poverty Commission, led by Lord Richard Best and bringing together experts and frontline practitioners, along with insights from people with lived experience of the issues.

When I established the Commission, few imagined the kind of world into which its report is being launched. The last six months have shown in the bleakest way possible the sharp divides in our society and the costs poverty imposes in terms of health and wellbeing, community and cohesion – dignity and opportunity. In short, poverty kills. It blights lives. It is a terrible waste of human potential and public money our community can ill afford.

Eighty years ago, Sir William Beveridge said that proposals to tackle poverty should be based on past experience - but should not be tied to it. At that time, war was abolishing landmarks of every kind, which created the opportunity for using experience in a clear field. As he said, a "revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions, not for patching".

We have had to take revolutionary steps to deal with the pandemic and its consequences. It is now time to learn from these to make lasting change. This report will be a vital resource in this task. It draws on evidence from residents, politicians and expert local and national organisations and presents powerful first-hand experiences bringing home what it means to live in poverty in Brent. Based on this

evidence, it highlights how organisations, including the council, can make the most difference to tackling poverty, its causes and consequences. In particular, it provides the council with practical, evidence-based recommendations for consideration by our Cabinet.

As a council we pride ourselves on the services we deliver for residents and those to tackle poverty have never been more important. Too many of Brent's people here are really struggling; we must take tangible and prompt action to help. Too often, we focus on what Beveridge called "patching" - the individual factors that impact people's income and quality of life and dealing with the consequences when problems arise.

The Commission has carried out a comprehensive review of why so many people in Brent live in poverty, what this means to peoples' everyday lives, what is done to deal with the issues. It explains the cumulative impact of rocketing housing costs, precarious employment and a welfare system which all too often puts process before people. Most important it has looked at what works, what doesn't – and what could be done better, giving us some clear and evidence-based recommendations to improve things.

I would like to thank the Chair and Commissioners for giving so much of their valuable time to undertake this work and to share their expertise. Their report gives some clear pointers to future action to make a real difference to peoples' lives, help realise their potential - and make Brent an even better place to live.

**CLLR ELEANOR SOUTHWOOD**

## Chair's Overview - Lord Best



The London Borough of Brent has asked us, a group of Commissioners who bring different experiences and expertise together, to explore the ways in which the council could do more to reduce the incidence of poverty, inequality and social exclusion among its citizens. This report sets out our findings and

recommendations, with those of greatest urgency highlighted in bold.

### **BRENT**

Brent is a young, vibrant, cosmopolitan London borough with enormous potential. It is within reach of well-paid jobs in the worlds of entertainment, culture, financial services, and international tourism. And some of the richest people in the world live close by. It houses a world-renowned sporting and entertainment centre, with all the opportunities that brings.

### **1. Devolution of Powers and Funding**

It is crystal clear to all of us at this difficult time that local authority areas like Brent are facing huge social issues, magnified by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. While public attention has been focused on the action of central government, it has been local government that has had to deliver new and existing services during the pandemic.

Local government is at the heart of partnerships that engage local communities and civil society - from charities providing advice and supporting rough sleepers to faith groups helping food banks and supporting volunteers – and we found Brent exemplified this positive approach. And the Commission was particularly taken with Brent's creation of new Hubs in providing accessible connections to the council for all its communities.

Anyone attending our sessions could not fail to be impressed by the energy and commitment of Brent's

But proximity to wealth and skilled employment opportunities brings major disadvantages for those without access to wealth or to well-paid jobs. Not least, housing costs reflect the price of living close to some of the most expensive land and property.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought home the consequences of the huge inequalities in this Borough. Brent has recorded the second highest number of deaths in the country, concentrated in its areas of greatest deprivation. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities constitute the majority of the population and these have been the worst hit by the pandemic.

The London Borough of Brent is deeply committed to improving the lives of those of its citizens who are disadvantaged by their circumstances. We, the Commissioners, have been considering what additional steps can be taken by the council, as well as government and others, to make a real difference. Some core themes from our deliberations stand out

elected members and officials. On so many issues – public health, social care, economic development, regeneration, planning, community safety, education, environmental health, trading standards, children's services, housing and so much more – Brent has demonstrated the value of local government and responded magnificently to the disaster of Covid-19. Surely the pandemic has shown how central government can and should devolve more powers to the local level, for example in promoting jobs and bolstering the local economy in the months to come.

However, Brent's funding – as with local authorities throughout the country – has been insecure and inadequate for the duties it needs to fulfil. At a time of unprecedented expenditure, income has dropped markedly.

Despite the proven importance of the local dimension to tackling the big societal issues, it is not

clear whether the under-resourcing of this sector is going to be addressed, or whether local finances are destined to deteriorate. Brent has spent substantial sums addressing the many aspects of Covid-19 afflicting the Borough, not least the remarkable efforts to accommodate those sleeping rough and the extra spending for care homes on protective measures.

So many of the solutions to problems of poverty in Brent come down to inadequate resourcing of the local authority. It is the under-resourcing, for example, of planning departments that inhibits speedy processing of consents and unequal negotiations with well-resourced developers; it is the need for funding for enforcement that holds back the improvement of living conditions; it is shortages of funds that prevents social care being freely available to all who need it.

**Overview Recommendation A: The Commission recommends that central government gives renewed consideration to the devolution of powers and resources to**

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO BRENT COUNCIL

**Recommendation 1: Building on the invaluable role played by Brent Council during the Covid-19 crisis, we recommend the council joins with the Local Government Association and London Councils to press for the transfer of more powers from Westminster, a fairer funding regime and full recovery of the emergency expenditure during the pandemic.**

### **local government to support its multiplicity of duties highlighted by the demands – and magnificent response of councils – during and after the Covid-19 crisis.**

Specific to Brent, as an “inner-outer London Borough”, is the central government funding formula that has not recognised the relative changes for such authorities. Many of the issues considered by the Commission in the context of poverty and social exclusion used to be more prevalent in the inner-London boroughs but have now shifted outwards, including to Brent (as also illustrated in the earlier report for Enfield Council by the Smith Institute).

**Overview Recommendation B: We recommend government looks again at the distribution of resources reflected in its funding for local councils and accepts the need for change to MHCLG’s grant formula.**

## 2. The Pervasive Impact of Unaffordable Housing

In considering the poverty that blights the lives of so many households in Brent, it soon became apparent to the Commissioners that this was not only about improving incomes but also about addressing excessive costs. And these exceptionally high costs of living in Brent are attributable particularly to spending on accommodation.

We noted that the proportion of households in poverty in Brent stood at 17% before taking account of housing costs: but the proportion rose to 33% when housing expenditure was taken into account. For children, the equally dramatic change was from 22% in poverty before, rising to 43% after housing costs are considered.

The Commission regards a home as affordable for working households where costs do not exceed a third of their incomes. But in the private rented sector, rents very often exceed 40% of net incomes and, for some, even more.

Nor is it the case that in return for high rents, Brent residents can expect high quality accommodation. We heard of appalling conditions in far too many properties, alongside severe overcrowding, a high level of evictions, homelessness and extensive use of costly temporary accommodation.

The prevalence of Covid-19 has demonstrated the vulnerabilities of those in the most deprived areas, often where BAME communities are concentrated.

Commissioners were impressed by Brent Council’s efforts to secure more accommodation at the genuinely affordable “social rents”. However, sales of council housing under the Right to Buy, and the virtual ending – until very recently - of new council

housebuilding alongside the dramatic reductions in grant to housing associations compared with a decade ago, have reduced the proportion of homes available on these terms. An enormous effort is required to return the balance toward social housing.

While the private rented sector has a clear role for groups such as young, mobile, professionals, or students sharing a property, it cannot be expected to provide secure affordable accommodation for families on modest incomes.

**Overview Recommendation C: We recommend a substantial increase in investment in social housing as a central component for the economic recovery, and the reversal of social injustices, post-Covid.**

Our detailed recommendations cover the need not only to build new homes for social rent and to secure more from private development, but also to rigorously enforce standards in the private rented sector (PRS). We recognise that a much expanded social housing programme requires far more central government investment. However, the centrality of the housing problem means the Commission urges Brent Council, in association with the Greater London Authority (GLA), to prioritise provision of more social rented homes.

The Covid-19 crisis may well present an important opportunity to secure land and property, from overstretched developers and landlords needing to exit the market: this could be the moment to shift the balance toward desperately needed affordable homes, not least saving wasteful expenditure on temporary accommodation (and for government on ever-rising Housing Benefit costs).



## RECOMMENDATIONS TO BRENT COUNCIL

**Recommendation 2:** While recognising that Brent Council's current housing plans compare favourably with other local authorities, we recommend stepping up borrowing to build and bringing forward council housebuilding programmes to take advantage of opportunities when demand for construction workers and for house purchase is weak.

**Recommendation 3:** We note that Brent has undertaken a land and asset review to identify opportunities for the council or its social sector partners to provide additional social housing or to use for community or economic betterment. We recommend Brent's land and asset review is used to develop a strategy and plan to allocate and ensure these assets are utilised to assist those in greatest need, e.g. using land currently occupied by redundant garages to build age-friendly homes that will release much needed family accommodation.

**Recommendation 4:** We recommend that in pursuing its strategic target to secure 50% of new homes as affordable, Brent gives special consideration to achieving more social rented homes and considers, when making planning decisions, how new developments can help reduce poverty (including by forging close links for housing with health, education and economic development).

**Recommendation 5:** We recommend that Brent uses its company, i4B, to purchase (as well as long term leasing) PRS property on the market, including ex-Right to Buy properties, to replace the requirement for expensive temporary accommodation and to acquire shops suitable for conversion into housing to regenerate high streets.

**Recommendation 6:** We recommend that the council conducts a whole market review of the Private Rented Sector – its scale, quality, rent levels, interactions with the benefits system and partner agencies – with a focus on tenants' perspectives.

**Recommendation 7:** We recommend that, following a PRS review, Brent Council creates and publicises a comprehensive enforcement strategy to raise standards, including for energy efficiency (which addresses fuel poverty) over the years ahead, guided by the recommendations from the recent report from Dr Julie Rugg (for Trust for London) <sup>1</sup>.

**Recommendation 8:** The council should work with the GLA to support community and voluntary sector organisations to identify opportunities for community-led housing in Brent.

**Recommendation 9:** We recommend that the actions proposed in the council's review of housing adaptations be implemented as speedily as possible, with particular regard to those with disabilities living in the private rented sector.

**Recommendation 10:** We recommend that the council adopt a housing-led approach to all those presenting as homeless (single homeless people and families experiencing homelessness), including with a Housing First offer where appropriate as the default response.

## 3. Improving Local Earnings

It is often said that work is the route out of poverty, and the welfare reform agenda has sought to get more people into employment. But if there is a mismatch between wages/salaries and the cost of living – e.g. between low pay and high rents – people are still left in poverty. Increasingly it is families with jobs that fall below the poverty line. Indeed, 72 per cent of children growing up in poverty in the UK live in a household where at least one person works.

We recognise that it is not only housing that can absorb a disproportionate amount of people's incomes. High childcare costs also disadvantage families with children. And transport can prove an expensive component of the household budget. But an improvement in pay would make a significant difference to poverty reduction.

The Commissioners were impressed by Brent's track record in seeking to ensure employers paid the London Living Wage (LLW). But we noted that relatively few of the many small or medium enterprises (SMEs) in the Borough were accredited LLW employers and around 30% of Brent's workforce earns less than the LLW.

The Commission would like to see Brent extend its role as an exemplar, not only in encouraging London Living Wage accreditation across all organisations, but also in addressing the need for flexibility in employment with contracts that guarantee minimum hours. We noted the opportunities for the council, using Social Value powers (and, where applicable, section 106 agreements), to achieve more apprenticeships and job placements.

Commissioners have placed particular emphasis on measures to improve employment prospects for young people – in particular we noted the need to address the digital divide that holds back some young people and language tuition for the many citizens who struggle with their English. The Commission emphasised the role which schools could play, not least through careers services helping with the transition from school to work.

The death of George Floyd while the Commission was meeting, followed by the Black Lives Matter campaign, were powerful reminders of the injustices and inequalities faced by our Black communities.



<sup>1</sup> London boroughs' management of the private rented sector Briefing Paper Dr Julie Rugg, Centre for Housing Policy, University of York February 2020



The Commission noted that the council's efforts to raise educational achievement - in particular of boys of Black Caribbean heritage - were showing positive results. And we commend Brent's investment, with the Trust for London, to develop the confidence, skills and access to employment of this group.

The Commission was delighted that Brent was hosting the London Borough of Culture and although the pandemic has put back its timetable, we can see considerable scope for using this occasion to engage and support young people in the Borough.

The pandemic has intensified the urgency of interventions to support employment: as we go to press, nearly 50,000 people in Brent have been furloughed and it seems likely that unemployment

will rise in the Autumn.

**Overview Recommendation D: We recommend that, as the major employer and the source of so much of the Borough's spending, Brent Council extends its impressive efforts to secure more and better jobs, especially for its younger citizens.**

The Commission heard of the exciting prospects for large scale development, including (with two other London Boroughs) the chance to make the Old Oak Common area a major source of jobs and affordable homes. Over the longer term, places like these could also be "Living Wage Places" leading the way for better paid employment.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO BRENT COUNCIL

**Recommendation 11:** We recommend the council makes poverty reduction an explicit part of the council's current and future economic development strategies, with a clear set of poverty reduction targets.

**Recommendation 12:** We are pleased that the council is introducing participatory budgeting and recommend that, with proper representation from those experiencing poverty, this should be treated as a key element of engagement and ownership of decisions at the neighbourhood level.

**Recommendation 13:** With the likely further decline in retail post-Covid, we recommend the council work with the GLA and central government to regenerate its high streets, support job creation and create affordable workspace, and places for community hubs, while enhancing the local environment.

**Recommendation 14:** We recommend the council uses its influence to maximise the help provided by careers services for those moving from school to work, and where appropriate, the council encourages take up of the government's "Kickstart Scheme".

**Recommendation 15:** We recommend that the council extends the use of its procurement powers to secure more good quality apprenticeships and social value from council contracts (using the Social Value Act and, where applicable, section 106 agreements), including by making contracts conditional on payment of the London Living Wage (e.g. through the West London Alliance partnership with neighbouring boroughs).

**Recommendation 16:** We strongly support the Brent Black Community Action Plan and we recommend strengthening of the links with CVS and the Young Brent Foundation and others in the voluntary and community sector.

**Recommendation 17:** We recommend that the council extends its offer, to support those with disabilities into employment and gives more publicity to the work it is doing.

**Recommendation 18:** We recommend that the delays caused by Covid-19 to Brent's imaginative programme as the London Borough of Culture be used to give extra focus to the opportunities for engaging young people, particularly those from BAME communities, in activities that raise aspirations and improve employment prospects.

**Recommendation 19:** We recommend that the council sets out clearly how it intends to work with the community and voluntary sector in tackling digital exclusion, and how it intends to ensure residents can operate online, including using digital hotspots created on estates and local safe spaces.

**Recommendation 20:** We recommend that Brent goes further in its efforts to encourage fair remuneration for employees by: insisting on contractors requiring their sub-contractors to pay the London Living Wage; for private sector residential and care homes to pay the LLW where the council is paying residents' fees; by considering the designation of specific locations as "Living Wage Places"; and by persuading accredited employers to address the need for flexibility in employment with contracts that guarantee minimum hours.

**Recommendation 21:** We recommend that Brent council signs up to the Good Work Standard and uses its convening power to bring together anchor employers to address low paid, low hours employment contracts in Brent and to guarantee improved terms (e.g. a minimum of sixteen hours a week and the right to notice periods of at least four weeks for shifts).

**Recommendation 22:** We recommend that the council expands its employment support packages to help tackle low wages and insecure work conditions.

**Recommendation 23:** We recommend that the council explores the opportunities for action to support affordable childcare provision, considering loans or grants to both providers and parents that would enable moves into employment in the aftermath of Covid-19.





**Recommendation 24:** We recommend that the council develops a bespoke digital offer and support for those with disabilities so that they can easily access services remotely and gain confidence in areas such as cashless payments, recognising that this could lower spending, enable access to benefits, and applications for support.

**Recommendation 25:** We recommend that the council uses its influence to encourage businesses to follow the lead of the council and become Disability Confident Employers.

#### 4. Financial Inclusion and Local Welfare

While the Commission well understood that only central government can ensure adequate incomes for all, we also saw what a difference a committed local authority can make. Local welfare support can be hugely important to the lives of both young and old. We saw this illustrated in the imaginative scheme for emergency grants and loans (via a Credit Union) to those badly hit by the pandemic.

The government's welfare reforms have sought to encourage everyone into work, with both sticks and carrots, through both incentives and conditionality. In the approaching era of potentially high unemployment, the role of welfare will need to concentrate more on protecting people from poverty.

Commissioners are hopeful that we are moving out of

the years of austerity, with its caps, ceiling and freezes in benefits that have reduced incomes, particularly affecting those with disabilities and households with more than two children.

In particular, we note how Universal Credit (UC) has proved deficient in several respects in the past. We earnestly hope that improvements to UC brought forward during the Covid-19 crisis will lead to permanent changes for the better. But Commissioners also recognised that the complexities of the benefits system have meant many people failing to receive support to which they are fully entitled.

In addition to the direct assistance for its citizens through help from such sources as Discretionary Housing Payments and the council's own emergency programme, the Commission felt Brent Council had a special role to play in referring and signposting all those who made contact with it to sources of financial, benefits and housing advice. The council can play a crucial role in enabling local advice agencies to thrive, not least in the time ahead when many people will have accumulated significant personal debt during the Covid-19 period.

**Overview Recommendation E: We recommend that the council ensures welfare support reaches everyone who needs it by making "every contact count" and referring people to, and supporting the finances of, the charities and community organisations that provide much-needed, expert advice.**

The Commission was also concerned about treatment of people who have accumulated Council Tax arrears (and other debts to the local authority). We believe it to be vital that collection processes do not make matters worse, not least where the debt has been created by a sudden fall in income as a result of the pandemic.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS TO BRENT COUNCIL

**Recommendation 26:** We recognise that post-Covid there will be problems with debt for many households and we recommend that Brent puts its innovative emergency arrangements for grants and interest-free loans onto a longer-term footing. We also recommend that advice services in the Borough are scaled up with a focus on tackling food and fuel poverty as well as debt advice.

**Recommendation 27:** We recommend that the council clarifies its local welfare assistance scheme with a designated budget, topped up with government funding including from the new hardship fund; providing support in cash rather than in kind; and relaxing the qualifying criteria of the scheme to reach those most affected by coronavirus.

**Recommendation 28:** We recommend that the council works with credit unions to provide low-cost loans to cut down dependence on loan sharks and other unscrupulous lenders.

**Recommendation 29:** We recommend that programmes such as the Community Money Mentors are rolled out across the Borough.

**Recommendation 30:** Although the Commission noted the review of the Council Tax Support scheme 18 months ago, we are concerned a) at the possibility of the arrangements leading to increased arrears as a result of Covid-19 and recommend special consideration be given to improving the treatment of non-dependants; and b) that the council reviews its approach to the outsourced enforcement service for Council Tax debts, and carefully monitors its use of enforcement agents, as well as issuing sanctions if agents do not operate fairly.

**Recommendation 31:** We recommend that the council should also consider whether court orders/liability orders are necessary in all cases of Council Tax arrears and, wherever possible, should exercise greater flexibility regarding payment plans and offers of repayment wherever possible, while discontinuing the practice of requiring immediate payment of a year's Council Tax

immediately when arrears are encountered.

**Recommendation 32:** We recommend that the Council explores a further extension of the Hub model so that advice services are available at venues such as GP surgeries, and family wellbeing centres in order for people to have their issues addressed in places that they already visit and trust.

**Recommendation 33:** We commend the work being undertaken by Brent to work with its health partners in mitigating the impact of the current pandemic and recommend continuing partnership in tailoring localised health support to those areas most impacted.

**Recommendation 34:** To help bring together the many strands of council activity concerned with child poverty, we recommend the council considers an overarching strategic objective to address child poverty with measurable outcomes that are regularly monitored, perhaps with a reporting line to Full Council.

**Recommendation 35:** We recommend that the council brings together a statutory-led "Youth and Community Strategy for Young People" in Brent and develops an outreach model with the voluntary and community sector to engage with young people in addressing the impacts of poverty and social exclusion.

**Recommendation 36:** We recommend that the council, as a priority, works with partners to tackle fuel poverty in the Borough, alerting private landlords letting the most energy inefficient homes to the requirement to improve energy standards, using enforcement powers and taking advantage of government vouchers toward the cost, thereby reducing excess winter deaths following Covid-19 and other respiratory illnesses.

**Recommendation 37:** We recommend that the council supports the future sustainability of food aid agencies in the borough including by further developing community garden schemes and working with food banks, mutual aid groups and residents' associations.







## IN CONCLUSION

To ensure ongoing value from the establishment of Brent's initiative in creating a Poverty Commission and enable the council to sustain momentum for poverty reduction, we have an overarching and unifying recommendation:

**Overview Recommendation F: We recommend that Brent Council establishes a consultative group that brings together elected members and officers with community organisations, service users and relevant bodies covering housing, health and education, and working collaboratively a) to agree measurable targets, reflecting the Commission's conclusions, for reducing poverty over the years ahead; b) to explore and initiate collaborative working to deliver holistic, person-centred services which empower residents and increase resilience; and c) to monitor progress, reporting back to the council on a periodic basis.**

Finally, my sincere thanks go to Councillor Eleanor

Southwood for initiating this Commission and supporting our work; to Jackie Barry-Purcell for her significant support and work for the Commission; to Paul Hunter and the Smith Institute for their significant input; to my assistant, Kennedy Williams; to the chairs of our sub-groups – Jacqueline Carr, Jacky Peacock and Alice Woudhuysen – and our Commissioners who overcame all the problems of meeting virtually to achieve this report together; and to the council's members and staff whose commitment to Brent and its citizens much impressed us.

We hope Brent Council will find our recommendations helpful and will be encouraged by our conclusions to redouble efforts and continue to seek new ways to support all those in the borough, not only those struggling with a vicious pandemic but also our fellow citizens living in poverty.

**RICHARD BEST  
JULY 2020**

## What is Poverty?

The Commission has taken poverty to mean not having enough money to afford what makes for a socially acceptable standard of living or to participate fully in society. According to the anti-poverty charity, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation:

**Poverty means not being able to heat your home, pay your rent, or buy the essentials for your children. It means waking up every day facing insecurity, uncertainty, and impossible decisions about money. It means facing marginalisation – and even discrimination – because of your financial circumstances. The constant stress it causes can lead to problems that deprive people of the chance to play a full part in society.<sup>2</sup>**

In using statistics, the Commission has adopted the Government's poverty measure of below 60 per cent of median incomes.

## The Commission

Brent's Poverty Commission was commissioned by the council's Cabinet Member for Housing and Welfare Reform, Cllr Eleanor Southwood. It was independently chaired by Lord Richard Best.

The Commission included local, regional and national stakeholders and experts in their fields. Although established by the council, the Commission itself is fully independent and non-party political. The work of the Chair and Commissioners has focused on housing, economy and jobs, financial exclusion and local welfare.

The Commission has taken an evidence-based approach. Between January and June 2020 it has

heard about the experiences of, and challenges facing, people in poverty in the Borough - from residents experiencing poverty; community groups supporting residents in poverty; from councillors; and from council officers working in services addressing the causes and consequences of poverty.

The findings from this evidence forms the basis of this report and the recommendations – these outline practical steps and approaches the council and its partners could consider to improve the livelihoods and life chances of Brent residents living in poverty.

## Local Context

Brent is an outer London borough in north-west London with a diverse, young population and a range of neighbourhoods stretching from Queen's Park at the edge of central London to more suburban communities in Northwick Park and Kenton. It is a place with a long tradition as somewhere where new communities have settled, regularly adding to its distinctive diversity - and this continues today. The Borough rightly prides itself on its large regeneration projects in areas such as Wembley, South Kilburn, Alpertown, Harlesden and Church End.

The Borough is growing – it has around 334,700 residents today; its population is projected to

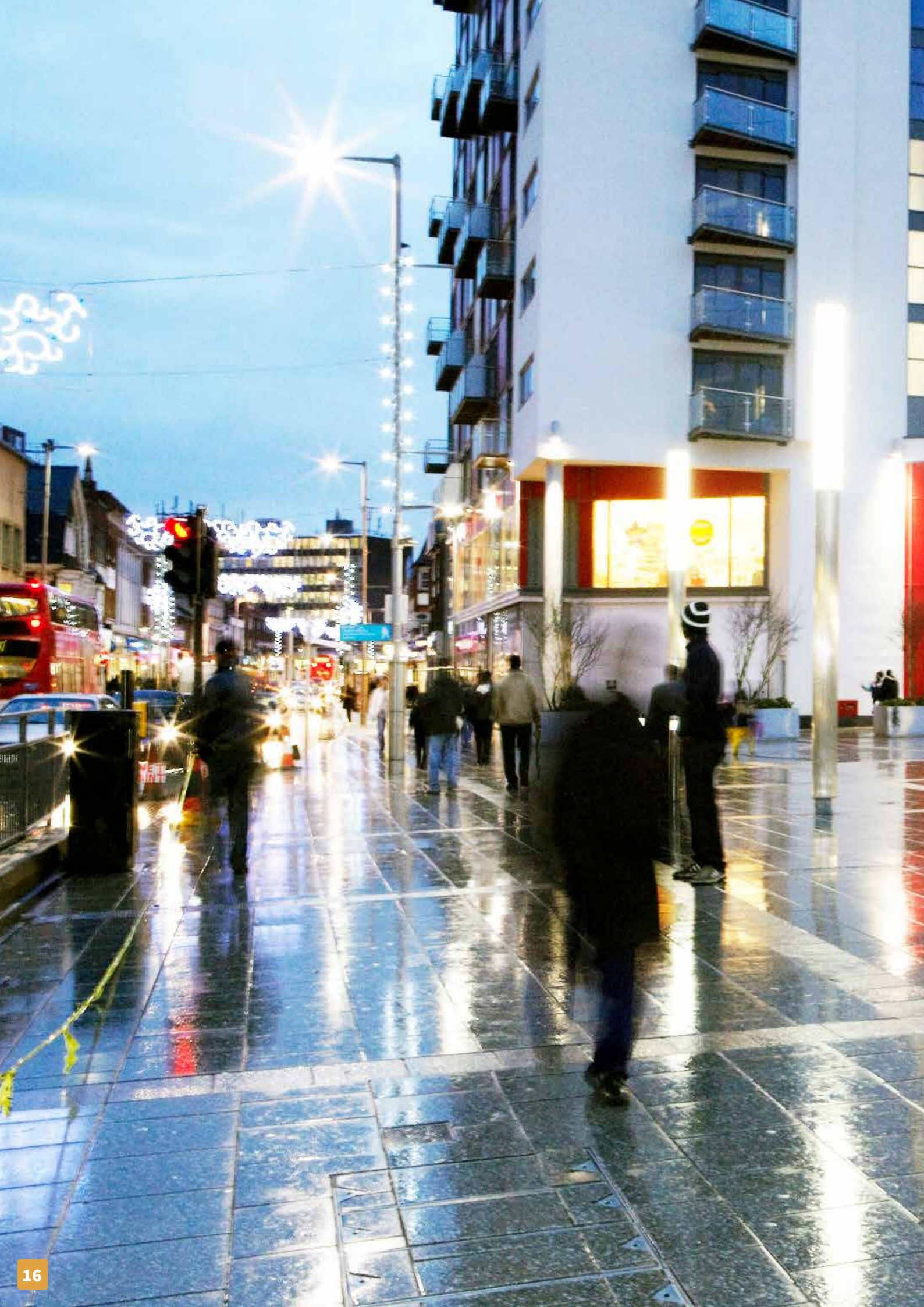
increase to almost 350,000 by 2023, and to over 375,000 by 2030. Population density (2018) is 77.4 people per hectare – the highest of any outer London borough and the 14th highest in England. While the population profile of Brent is relatively young (67% of the population are of working age), there are key differences within this. For example, the Black African population is young and growing (26% of children under five are Black), while the Black Caribbean population is ageing.<sup>3</sup> Residents are living longer too – the number of residents aged 65 and over will increase by 41% by 2030. Over 160 languages are spoken in Brent schools.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, What is Poverty

<sup>3</sup> JSNA 2019

<sup>4</sup> For more detail about Brent see: London Borough of Brent, Borough Plan 2019-2023





Those residents the Commission heard from were proud of where they lived and saw their future in the Borough.

## Poverty in Brent

Brent is an outer London borough, but with many of the issues associated with inner London. One of these is a high poverty rate, with key measures and indicators consistently showing that the Borough is poor by both London and UK standards<sup>5</sup>.

Poverty in Brent takes many forms and has different drivers. However, it is clear from the case studies presented in this report that being in poverty means that someone does not have enough money to enable them to have a socially acceptable quality of life – to afford enough food, live in decent housing and participate in everyday activities. In the case of Brent, too many people cannot live the kind of lives most take for granted simply because of the insufficiency of their income.

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“I can’t afford basic everyday stuff like food and bus passes....”  
(Brent resident)

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“There is no going out, no partying. Everything is accounted for... gas always suffers and my daughter is always complaining that it’s freezing.”  
(Brent resident)

It is generally accepted that to support a socially acceptable quality of life, an income not less than 60% of average household income is required. Higher housing costs in London mean these consume a

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“I love my neighbours, it’s like family, I don’t want to move anywhere else” (Brent resident)

large proportion of someone’s income. For this reason this threshold should be applied after allowing for housing costs to give an accurate idea of the number of residents facing financial hardship in Brent.

One in five people live below this poverty threshold in the country as a whole. In Brent, rates are much higher. One in three households here live in poverty – the sixth highest rate in London and the highest in outer London. Of Brent’s 34 neighbourhoods, 15 are in the top 10% nationally for poverty rates.<sup>6</sup> There are particular concentrations of poverty in areas such as Harlesden and Stonebridge. The pandemic-related downturn has also shown how close a wider group of residents – including many in work - are to falling into poverty; some Commissioners working with Brent residents noted that many people currently seeking support were doing so for the first time.

Poverty rates are particularly high for young Brent residents. One study has found that for every five children in Brent, two will be in poverty. It estimated that there are almost 37,000 children excluded from a decent standard of living and from participating in society because of their income.<sup>7</sup>

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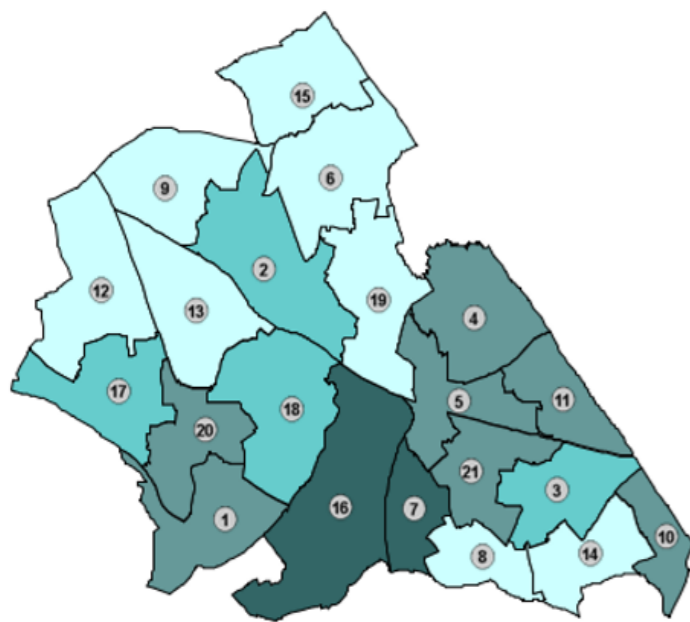
“School trips are out which makes me sad. My daughter tells me that she doesn’t want to go but I know she’s just saying that because she knows we can’t afford it.” (Brent resident)

<sup>5</sup> Smith Institute – The decline of Outer London 2019

<sup>6</sup> Analysis of ONS, Households in Poverty estimates for middle layer super output areas, England & Wales, 2013/14

<sup>7</sup> Stone, J and Hirsch, D Local indicators of child poverty, 2017/18 (Centre for Research in Social Policy, 2019)





Key	Ward	Proportion of households in poverty
1	Alperton	35%
2	Barnhill	32%
3	Brondebury Park	32%
4	Dollis Hill	35%
5	Dudden Hill	34%
6	Fryent	29%
7	Harlesden	39%
8	Kensal Green	28%
9	Kenton	25%
10	Kilburn	36%
11	Mapesbury	35%
12	Northwick Park	24%
13	Preston	29%
14	Queens Park	25%
15	Queensbury	28%
16	Stonebridge	42%
17	Sudbury	33%
18	Tokington	33%
19	Welsh Harp	29%
20	Wembley Central	34%
21	Willesden Green	38%

Note: Source: Analysis of ONS, Households in Poverty estimates for middle layer super output areas, England & Wales, 2013/14 and ONS, Table SAPE20DT3: Mid-2014 Middle Layer Super Output Area population estimates for England and Wales by Single Year of Age and Sex, Persons - Supporting Information. Rescaled to wards using ONS, Middle Layer Super Output Area (2011) to Ward (2016) Lookup in England and Wales

## Poverty, and the Coronavirus Pandemic

The Commission was established in January 2020 before the outbreak of Covid-19 in the UK. However, many of the Commission's evidence sessions took place after the lockdown, by when the impacts of the pandemic on low income residents and on poverty levels could be discerned, were discussed and examined.

The pandemic has certainly made the challenges facing the Borough much greater. It has also brought pre-existing inequalities into stark focus; exacerbated many problems facing those already in poverty; and shown how many people are only one step away from it. These inequalities are evidenced by who have died, but also by who have been most affected by the economic and social consequences of the pandemic.

Although the data continues to unfold, the Covid-19 death rate in Brent is one of the highest in the UK.<sup>8</sup> Brent has the second highest number of confirmed cases in London - 1491 (as at 26 June 2020).<sup>9</sup> The highest rates are in Harlesden and parts of

Stonebridge and Barnhill wards.

The emerging evidence is clear that the death rate from Covid-19 is higher in more deprived areas, amongst lower paid workers, and in areas with higher rates of overcrowding.<sup>10</sup> Death rates amongst some BAME groups are also far higher. It has also disproportionately impacted older people, with those aged over 80 seventy times more likely to die than those under 40. More men have died than women; those in health occupations have also been particularly affected. As widely noted - and confirmed by Public Health England - those from BAME communities have been impacted most.

Commissioners heard how the council has put in place a comprehensive pandemic communications plan. Its approach has been based on a recognition of the structural inequalities existing across society, and the council has been – and continues to be – keen to work with communities to find solutions. Its immediate

8 Office for National Statistics – Deaths involving COVID-19 - Number of deaths and age-standardised rates, by sex, Local Authorities in England and Wales, deaths occurring between 1st March 2020 and 17th April 2020

9 Public Health England

10 ONS, Coronavirus (COVID-19) related deaths by occupation, England and Wales: deaths registered up to and including 20 April 2020; Deaths involving COVID-19 by local area and socioeconomic deprivation: deaths occurring between 1 March and 17 April 2020; Coronavirus (COVID-19) related deaths by ethnic group, England and Wales: 2 March 2020 to 10 April 2020; Office for National Statistics – Deaths involving COVID-19 - Number of deaths and age-standardised rates, by sex, Local Authorities in England and Wales, deaths occurring between 1st March 2020 and 17th April 2020; Barker, N The housing pandemic: four graphs showing the link between COVID-19 deaths and the housing crisis, Inside Housing, 29 May 2020

action has included working with health partners to increase access to care and work to manage and control co-morbidities. Recognising that travel to NHS hospitals in the Borough can be problematic for many residents, the council has set up a local testing site in Harlesden to ease access for those who live in the area.

The national, regional and local economic consequences of the pandemic are set to be significant. The Bank of England has suggested that there could be the sharpest annual contraction in UK Gross Domestic Product (GDP) since 1706. UK GDP fell by 25% in the first four months of 2020 and forecasts by Oxford Economics for the West London Alliance suggests a fall in West London Gross Value Added (GVA) of 9-14% in 2020 and loss of 41,000 jobs. This report gives two scenarios – a baseline and a

downside one. Under the former Brent could see an increase in unemployment of 3,300 (2019-20); under the downside scenario there could be an increase of 5,800 (from 4.1% of working age population to 6%) 2019-20 and a further 1,300 2020-21 (4.1% in 2019, 6.7% in 2020 and 8.7% in 2021).<sup>11</sup>

Population surveys have suggested that those on the lowest incomes are most likely to be furloughed and the ability of those on lower incomes to work from home is more limited.<sup>12</sup> Brent has the second highest proportion of its working age population furloughed in London. Between February and May the numbers claiming Universal Credit in the Borough have increased by 241%.<sup>13</sup> The longer-term impact of the pandemic could fall heaviest on the lowest paid sectors,<sup>14</sup> with the retail and leisure

11 Oxford Economics, How might Coronavirus impact the West London Economy? – A report for the West London Alliance, June 2020

12 Resolution Foundation, Doing what it takes (2020); Resolution Foundation, The economic effects of coronavirus in the UK (2020); Resolution Foundation, The effects of the coronavirus crisis on workers (2020)

13 Nomis data

14 HMRC, Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme Official Statistics, 11 June 2020





sectors unlikely to see an immediate recovery.

Without action there is also likely to be a serious unemployment crisis, both across the country and in Brent. Studies of previous downturns have shown that young people leaving education and entering the world of work are worst affected, with the so-called scarring effects on their health, pay and employment prospects lasting longer than the recession.<sup>15</sup> The pandemic-related restrictions have particularly impacted on sectors like hospitality, entertainment and non-essential retail sectors which tend to employ disproportionate numbers of younger people. Workers in these sectors are relatively more likely to have been furloughed during the lockdown and it is as yet unclear how many of these jobs could be lost permanently. Older workers, who may find it harder to find new jobs could also be hard-hit.

The evidence is already pointing to a rapid rise in unemployment in Brent. In areas such as Harlesden

new starters on Universal Credit increased five-fold in a single month. The evidence we heard confirms the data, suggesting there is set to be growing need for support and advice to help people into work, out of problem debt and to remain in their homes – help to pay rent arrears and avoid eviction. Commissioners heard about the work the council is doing to support residents and this is detailed later in the report. Its importance cannot be over-emphasised.

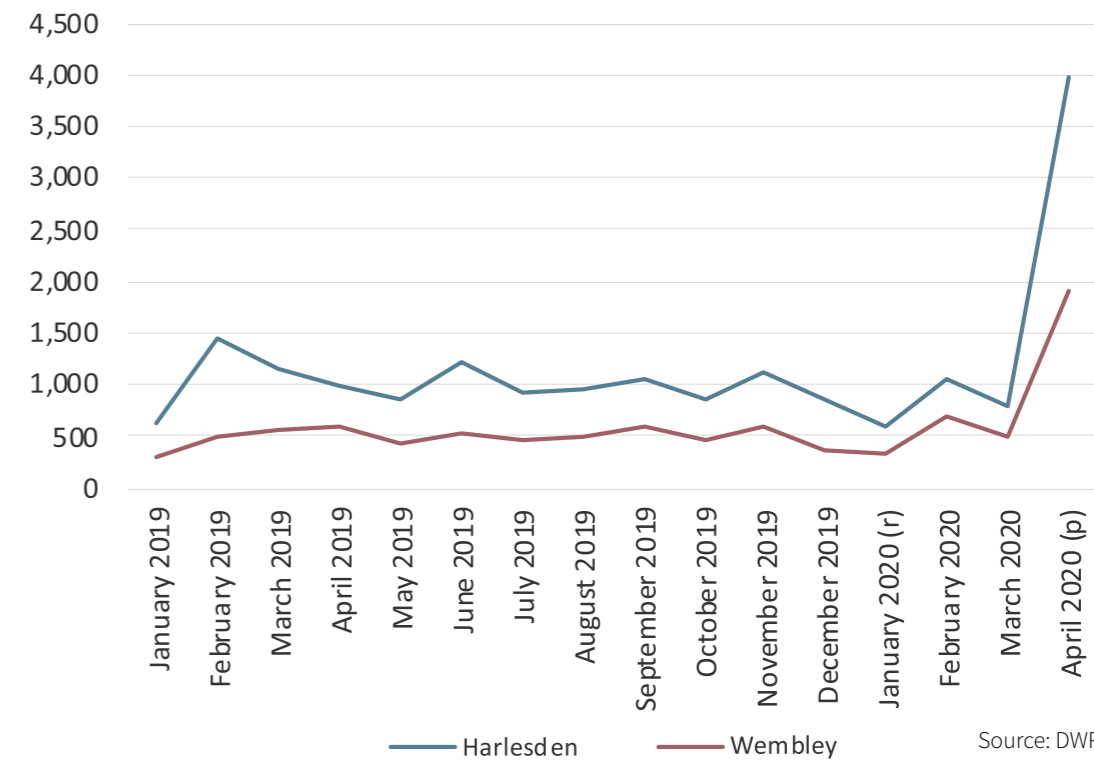
“We have an uncertain future”  
(Brent resident)

“You just feel stuck”  
(Brent resident)

15 IFS, Recessions have a lasting impact on employment and pay of young adults – but parents can provide an important safety net (2017)



## Starts to Universal Credit



Source: DWP, Stat-Xplore

This health and economic crises have presented the Commission with an extremely challenging backdrop. They have also placed the spotlight on what poverty means for people’s health, quality of life and life chances. The backdrop also makes the Commission’s work more urgent - to set out what can be done to support people through this crisis and help secure a strong, fair and resilient recovery for all residents.

So many of the solutions to problems of poverty in Brent come down to inadequate resourcing of the local authority. It is the under-resourcing, for example, of planning departments that inhibits speedy processing of consents and unequal negotiations with well-resourced developers; it is the need for funding for enforcement that holds back the improvement of living conditions; it is shortages of funds that prevents social care being freely available to all who need it.

**Overview Recommendation A: The Commission recommends that central government gives renewed consideration to the devolution of powers and resources to local government to support its multiplicity of duties highlighted by the demands – and magnificent response of councils – during and after the Covid -19 crisis.**

Specific to Brent, as an “inner-outer London borough”, is the central government funding formula that has not recognised the relative changes for such authorities. Many of the issues considered by the Commission in the context of poverty and social exclusion used to be more prevalent in the inner-London boroughs but have now shifted outwards, including to Brent (as also illustrated in the earlier report for Enfield Council by the Smith Institute).

**Overview Recommendation B: We recommend government looks again at the distribution of resources reflected in its funding for local councils and accepts the need for change to MHCLG’s grant formula.**

**Recommendation 1: Building on the invaluable role played by Brent Council during the Covid-19 crisis, we recommend the council joins with the Local Government Association and London Councils to press for the transfer of more powers from Westminster, a fairer funding regime and full recovery of the emergency expenditure during the pandemic.**







## Housing

The cost of housing in the Borough is a particular challenge and impacts directly on the levels of poverty. In the Government's Index of Multiple Deprivation, Brent is the fourth most deprived borough when looking at access to housing services.<sup>16</sup> Poverty rates almost double when housing costs are included.<sup>17</sup> In addition, large numbers of people receive Housing Benefit,<sup>18</sup> with a high proportion in the PRS where rents are higher, tenancies less secure and the housing quality poorer. As such housing problems are both a cause of poverty and a consequence.

The Commission heard from Brent Council about housing and poverty in the borough. Many of the challenges the Commission identified are acknowledged by the council who outlined to the Commission what they were currently doing to address them:

**Overview Recommendation C: We recommend a substantial increase in investment in social housing as a central component for the economic recovery, and the reversal of social injustices, post-Covid.**

Landlord Services in Brent cover 12,000 homes with 8,000 tenants and 4,000 leaseholders. The Private Housing service supports and regulates circa 37,000 rented homes. The Supply and Partnership service is focused on increasing the supply of truly affordable homes in Brent. Alongside these is the Housing Needs service, focused on preventing and managing homelessness. Commissioners heard that the council had commissioned Cambridge Research to undertake an affordability review of its housing services. It found that among social housing tenants:

- More than 50% of all single people and couples without children cannot afford LB Brent social rents without support from Housing Benefit.
- Around 75% of all single people and couples without children cannot afford housing association social rents without support from Housing Benefit.

- Less than 25% single people or couples could afford the London Living Rent in NW London without support from Housing Benefit.
- More than 90% of single people and couples without children cannot afford Affordable Rents without support from Housing Benefit.
- More than 90% of couples or lone parents with two children cannot afford LB Brent social rents, and no family with two children (whether couple or lone parent) can afford any rent that is more expensive than LB Brent social rents.

The council recognises the challenges - and has plans in place to tackle them. It has embarked on one of the largest council house-building programmes in London, seeking to deliver 5,000 truly affordable homes within 5 years, 1,000 of which will be directly provided by the council. This includes building the council's own temporary accommodation, ensuring that no one in Brent will be in temporary accommodation supplied by anyone else within 5 years. So far 128 new homes have been built and let; a further 447 are on site, and 443 are being taken through planning.

**Recommendation 2: While recognising that Brent Council's current housing plans compare favourably with other local authorities, we recommend stepping up borrowing to build and bringing forward council housebuilding programmes to take advantage of opportunities when demand for construction workers and for house purchase is weak.**

The Commission noted that the Borough contains opportunities for "infill" schemes on small sites, some of which are in the ownership of the council. These present important opportunities for social action: for example, sites within council estates occupied at present by unpopular garages can be redeveloped for terraced bungalows that meet the needs of older tenants, thereby releasing genuinely affordable homes for families.

**Recommendation 3:** We note that Brent has undertaken a land and asset review to identify opportunities for the council or its social sector partners to provide additional social housing or to use for community or economic betterment. We recommend Brent's land and asset review is used to develop a strategy and plan to allocate and ensure these assets are utilised to assist those in greatest need, e.g. using land currently occupied by redundant garages to build age-friendly homes that will release much needed family accommodation.

In June 2020, Brent's Cabinet approved a new approach to tenancies across the Borough. The new Tenancy Strategy sets out clear expectations of all landlords, including private landlords. The Tenancy Management Policy reaffirms the council's commitments to its own tenants. Brent has committed to work closely with social housing providers and private landlords to encourage them to review the way they manage their tenancies. The council's aim is to make sure that all Brent residents who are renting have a guaranteed level of security in their home. The council also pledges to support Brent residents to stay in their homes for as long as they are suitable for them, and to continue to work proactively to prevent homelessness.

As we note later, the council also has a range of regeneration programmes to help boost the supply of affordable housing and improve local areas.

Section 106 agreements with developers and Community Infrastructure Levy receipts from new development lever resources allowing the council to reinvest in infrastructure and the community, spreading the benefit of regeneration more equally throughout the Borough and where it is needed most. Infrastructure improvements delivered in this way include a primary care healthcare facility in Wembley Park, Alperton and South Kilburn and new schools in Wembley, South Kilburn and Colindale.

**Recommendation 4:** We recommend that in pursuing its strategic target to secure 50% of new homes as affordable, Brent gives special consideration to achieving more social rented homes and considers, when making planning decisions how new developments can help reduce poverty (including by forging close links for housing with health, education and economic development).

**Recommendation 5:** We recommend that Brent uses its company, i4B, to purchase (as well as long term leasing) PRS property on the market, including ex-Right to Buy properties, to replace the requirement for expensive temporary accommodation and to acquire shops suitable for conversion into housing to regenerate high streets.

It is clear that housing problems are both a cause and consequence of poverty. High (and rising) housing costs in the PRS, combined with a lack of social housing, creates housing affordability problems, pushes people into poverty and are a key cause of homelessness. The reliance by those on low incomes on the PRS often results in less housing security and lower housing standards. The Commission's view was that there was an urgent need both to build more social housing and to improve standards within the PRS.

The high cost of housing in Brent is a cause of considerable hardship. While around 17% of the Borough's households are in poverty before housing costs are accounted for, this rises to 33% when they are.<sup>19</sup> Private rents in Brent are the second highest in outer London. An average priced two-bed property in the private rented sector will set a resident back almost £1,500 per month.<sup>20</sup> And one in the lowest 20 per cent of rentals will cost £1,150.

Rents are considerably lower in the social rented sector. Those the Commission heard from living in council or housing association properties were generally satisfied with their accommodation. By contrast, many of those renting privately reported issues with the quality, security and affordability of their housing. These issues included overcrowding,

16 MHCLG, IMD 2019

17 Analysis of ONS, Households in Poverty estimates for middle layer super output areas, England & Wales, 2013/14

18 DWP, Stat-Xplore

19 Analysis of ONS, Households in Poverty estimates for middle layer super output areas, England & Wales, 2013/14

20 Valuation Office Agency, Private rental market statistics



damp, disrepair, needing to share facilities and difficulty paying rent. The latter can lead to eviction

and ultimately homelessness, which is closely associated with poverty.

“[The landlord] became really rude and aggressive. She got the county court to send in bailiffs while I was sleeping. They drilled through the door and told me to leave. I asked them “where am I supposed to go with my child?” They told me to take whatever I could and then I had a week to get the rest of my stuff.” (Brent resident)

These issues have become urgent with a shift towards private renting. The PRS has grown rapidly and is today home to one in four Brent households. Within Brent, around half of households in the PRS claim Housing Benefit and 45% of people claiming Housing Benefit in Brent are in the PRS.<sup>21</sup> Such data

suggest a significant number of people in poverty in Brent are in the PRS, where rents are higher, there is less security and where national data suggest homes are less likely to meet the decent homes standard than in the social rented sector.<sup>22</sup>

21 DWP, Stat-Xplore  
22 MHCLG, English Housing Survey



### LAUREN'S STORY\*

Lauren is 31 and has always lived in Brent. She lives with her 11 year-old son in a housing association property. For the past year Lauren has been working as a teaching assistant and she has recently secured a full-time contract with the school, having previously worked there through an agency. However, she has not yet started work on this contract as it was finalised in March, just before the coronavirus lockdown. She thinks she will be furloughed on 80% of her pay and is planning to call the housing association to enquire whether she is able to pay less rent during this time.

Lauren is under a lot of financial stress. She feels she is working just to pay bills and that almost everything goes on this. Lauren receives Universal Credit but once she begins working full-time she believes that there will only be a small allowance for her son. Up to now she has received Housing Benefit and a 25% reduction in Council Tax but says “I don't notice it”. Lauren can rarely afford to buy new clothes, go on holiday or go out socially, or afford to pay for activities for her son. In the past she has missed meals and used electric blankets so she did not have to use gas. She would like to save to start a business or help her son have a good start to his working life, but simply cannot afford to.

“We can't go on holidays. It's expensive for both of us. My son hasn't been away since he was five or six. His grandad pays for him to play football but he'd also like to do boxing and karate”.

“I can't tell you the last time I bought clothes, it's very rare”.

Prior to living in her housing association property Lauren rented privately. Lauren fell into arrears as she did not have enough income to cover the bills. She discussed it with her landlord and paid whatever and whenever she could against her arrears. However, her landlord grew impatient as she wanted to sell the property. Lauren was served an eviction notice which resulted in bailiffs entering the property and her being given less than 24 hours to vacate her home.

“[The landlord] became really rude and aggressive. She got the county court to send in bailiffs while I was sleeping. They drilled through the door and told me to leave. I asked them ‘where am I supposed to go with my child?’ They told me to take whatever I could and then I had a week to get the rest of my stuff. I was under a lot of pressure - I had to organise a van and people to help. I took what I could but I needed to leave a lot of things behind.”

Lauren was placed by the council in emergency hostel accommodation. When she was made homeless Lauren went to the GP as she was “really, really down”. They offered her anti-depressants but she was not signposted to other organisations or other forms of support. She was scared to go back as she did not want to take medication and says that she “kept trying to deal with it myself”. What helped her was going to church, and she also says that “some of my friends were really helpful at providing moral support as they were always checking in and they helped me pack when I was evicted”.

Lauren did not seek any help from any external organisations other than that from the council. She says she did not know what if anything was available. Whilst in emergency accommodation, she kept bidding for social housing properties. Lauren counts herself “very lucky” to have secured her current home after only a couple of months in the hostel.

\*names have been changed

The impact of poor housing on people's lives has become particularly stark during the pandemic with analysis showing higher death rates from Covid-19 in areas where overcrowding is highest.<sup>23</sup> The impact was also evident amongst those residents we spoke to who were seeking to self-isolate while also having to share kitchen and bathroom facilities.

The council has PRS landlord licensing in place, with some requirements being borough-wide and more targeted licensing covering the wards of Dudden Hill, Kensal Green, Kilburn, Mapesbury and Queens Park. The council's request to extend these further across the Borough has been refused by the Secretary of State.

23 Barker, N The housing pandemic: four graphs showing the link between COVID-19 deaths and the housing crisis, Inside Housing, 29 May 2020



The housing aspirations of those the Commission heard from within the private rented sector were to secure a council or housing association property. However, most did not regard this as an option available to them because of the lack of social housing compared with the demand.

Those residents felt they lacked alternatives within the PRS. Some spoke of private landlords being reluctant to rent to them because their incomes were low or asking for large deposits. As a result, those in unsatisfactory housing in the PRS felt trapped and that their problems intractable.

“I can’t do anything about it, I’ve got no choice, I can’t go anywhere else.” (Brent resident)

**HALIMA’S STORY\***

34-year-old Halima was born in Somalia and has been living in the UK since she was 16. She is sole parent to three school-aged children and has lived in the Brent and Camden areas for the past five years.

Her current accommodation is a three bedroom flat rented from a private landlord and there are a lot of issues where she lives. For example, the beds are all broken - meaning that the children can’t use them and it is difficult for them to sleep. As they live on the second floor of a converted house, noise is an issue and she has an ongoing dispute with their downstairs neighbours who complain regularly about the noise her children make. She has spoken to the council several times about the situation, but they are unable to help her. She is on the waiting list for social housing but has no idea how long she will need to wait.

Financially, things have been very tough for Halima even before coronavirus. Four months before lockdown she started a part-time job for a London bus tour company. However, once she was working in this job she lost some of the financial assistance that she was getting previously. For example, she no longer received free school meals for all four children but only the youngest two. In addition, her Council Tax relief and Housing Benefit were both reduced.

Her financial circumstances have become even more precarious since lockdown. She hasn’t applied for UC even though she is now not able to work and is not eligible for furloughing due to the nature of her employment contract. She tried to call UC to ask about this but could not get through to them. She also worries about applying for UC to replace her working tax credits and child tax credits, saying: “I can’t risk having no money by changing anything. I’ve left things as it is. I’ve heard so many bad things about UC. It’s quite scary”.

She says that the family misses out on a lot of things due to their severe financial constraints.

“We don’t even have basic things like beds and toys for the children. It’s really difficult and it makes me a bit sad. The older they get the more that they want.”

In the future, she would like to work more but feels that she is likely to be worse off financially if she did as she would lose benefits and this would not be made up for by more earnings.

The impacts of housing problems on those experiencing them are significant, contributing to stress and mental health problems, as well as to problem debt.

“I can’t look forward in terms of making a life for myself. I feel trapped, I feel hopeless.” (Brent resident)

**INCREASING THE SUPPLY OF SOCIAL HOUSING**

Based on the evidence presented to it, the Commission’s view is that many of the housing problems stemmed from the lack of social housing and overreliance on the private rented sector to meet the housing needs of Brent’s low-income residents.

“If I work more then I don’t get Housing Benefit or they try to tell me they have overpaid me. It’s really frustrating as I wish I could work more hours but then I’d be working all this time just to pay for the house and have nothing for the kids.”

Halima is a recovering alcoholic. In the past this contributed to a lot of problems financially and she still has outstanding debts from this time, including to another council and a number of utility companies. She is repaying some of these past debts but not others as she says: “I can’t deal with every debt or I won’t be able to live.”

She has been in contact with a number of local third sector organisations regarding issues such as her housing, as well as the broken beds, but does not so far feel that they have provided her with the support that she needs. On the other hand, she was previously supported by a drug and alcohol charity and she says that “they were brilliant and helped me get out the other end.

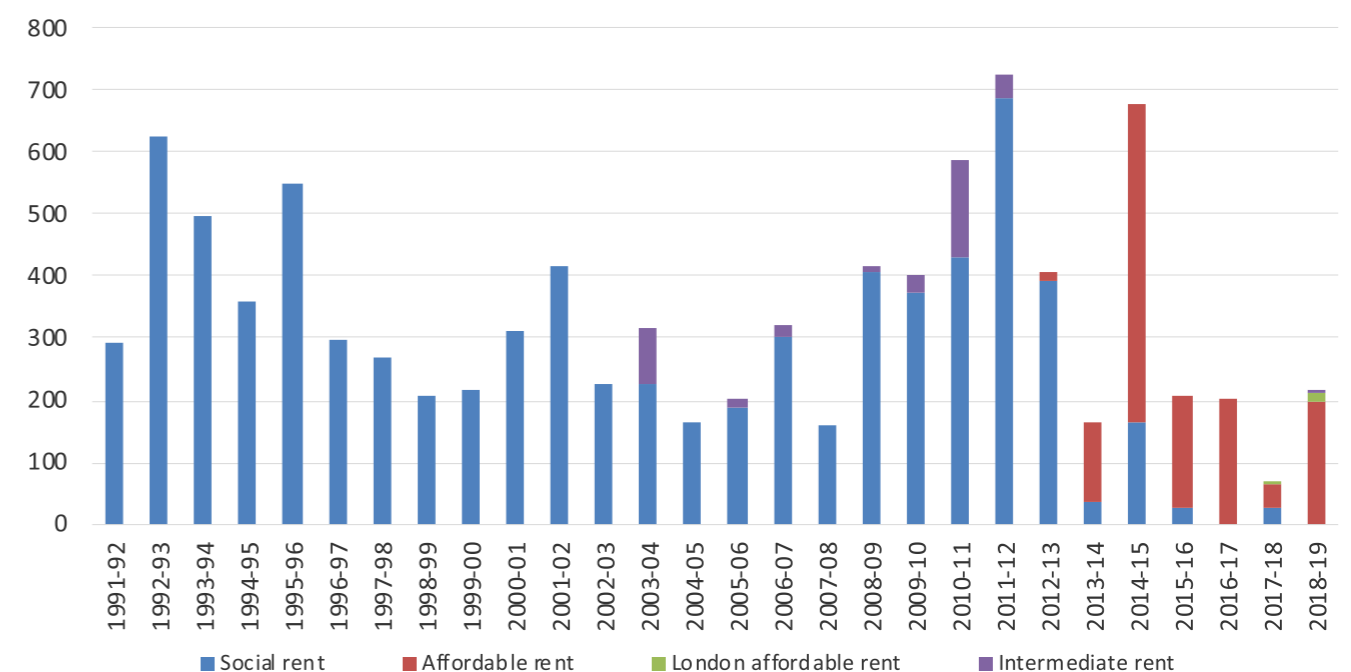
\*names have been changed

The Commission’s overarching view was that the housing challenges facing the Borough could only be seriously addressed if there was a considerable increase in the level of social housing being built. This is confirmed by the council’s Strategic Housing Market Assessment, which suggested that 12,200 households required affordable housing and the Borough would need to build 22,000 affordable homes in the period 2041 (plus replacement of any lost stock through right to buy or demolitions).<sup>24</sup>

The Commission heard from the council about its housing plans, including current levels of affordable housing being built. The ability of Brent Council and other social landlords operating in the area to build more social housing is hampered by the lack of central government grant funding. The Commission also had concerns about the rent levels of some new social housing, which can be considerably higher than traditional council housing rents.

Despite the obstacles facing the council meeting its

New Supply of sub market, rented accommodation in Brent



Source: MHCLG, Live Tables 1006-1009

24 Opinion Research Services, London Borough of Brent: Strategic Housing Market Assessment Update, 2018



housing ambitions, it set out its plans to increase the supply of affordable housing by 5,000 homes within five years to the Commission.

The situation looks more daunting set against the backdrop of a downturn, with many development sites likely to be stalled as demand for private housing declines. However, traditionally increased government investment in social rented new housing has been part of a recovery plan. There is a compelling case that housing creates jobs, improves financial wellbeing of tenants, reduces the Housing Benefit bill and increases tax revenue, all of which far outweigh the initial outlay in government funding. The costs of development can also be reduced as land values fall in a downturn. However, the Commission felt that it was important to ensure that negotiated affordable housing contributions from private developers were based on projects, rather than current values.

### IMPROVING STANDARDS IN THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR

The lack of income means that those in poverty often struggle to improve their housing situation. Poor quality and overcrowded housing were prominent

themes amongst those we interviewed. Building more social housing may provide more affordable, better quality and more secure housing, but it takes time. Improving standards within the PRS is therefore essential to addressing causes and consequences of poverty. This view was emphasised by those Commissioners with front line experience of supporting people in the PRS, who described some of the poor and sometimes illegal practices of landlords and the urgent need to enforce standards.

Local authorities do have powers to improve standards within the private rented sector, including through licensing of landlords. The Commission noted the decision by central Government to not allow the extension of selective licensing to the Borough's Willesden Green, Harlesden and Wembley Central wards, despite the council's request. The Commission believes that licensing is a necessary tool to improving standards. However, for licensing of landlords to be effective it also needs to be enforced.

Commissioners heard about the advice and support that is given to people facing challenges in the PRS, as illustrated in the case study that follows.

## SARA AND INDI'S STORY\* – ADVICE4RENTERS

Sara\* and Indi\* did not earn much, so they shared a home with their adult son and his family who were renting privately. When the younger people moved on, Sara and Indi found another couple to share with them so they could afford the rent and household bills, and all four signed a new tenancy agreement with the landlord.

A new tenancy agreement was signed every year and each time the rent was increased by £50 a month. Over the years the sharing tenants changed several times and by 2017 the rent was £1,500 a month. The following year, the landlord said he had problems with Brent Council and the other two tenants must leave. He wanted Sara and Indi to sign a new agreement in their names only. They said they could not do this because they would not be able to afford the rent on their own. By then, Indi was unable to work, having had brain surgery following a stroke and Sara could only work 4 hours a day as she had to care for Indi. They explained that the other tenants had moved out leaving a large number of bills. The landlord said *"don't pay the rent, just pay the bills"* so they thought that he understood, but that was before they received a notice seeking possession saying they owed £12,000 in rent.

Sara attended the court hearing with a friend who translated for her, and the duty solicitor objected to mistakes in the Claim which the court ordered the landlord to amend. Sara was then referred to Advice4Renters (A4R). They established that the property was in very poor condition and Sara and Indi had spent their own money trying to maintain it. Sara said they really wanted to leave but had no money for a deposit and knew the landlord wouldn't return the £1,500 deposit on their current home because of the arrears.

A4R explained that they had a legal claim for the disrepair in their home; and for the fact that the landlord had not protected their deposit. The court could order the landlord to return the deposit plus three times that amount. A4R offered to try to negotiate a settlement with the landlord, and after a lot of to-ing and fro-ing it was agreed that the landlord would waive any claim for rent owed and would pay Sara and Indi £3,000 to help them to move to a new home. Sara and Indi agreed to move out by a set date.

A4R also helped Sara and Indi to claim additional benefits that they didn't know they were entitled to. One of A4R's volunteer mentors helped with information on affordability and guidance on how to look for properties that would be suitable for their medical needs. Sara commented, "We are delighted with our new home, it is all new and so clean and lovely. Allie [the mentor] is helping us to get furniture and we are very grateful. Now we don't have to worry about the debt we feel so much better".

\*names have been changed

Some Commissioners highlighted that Brent did not have a clearly understood and shared enforcement strategy. Although there is not a documented strategy in place, officers told the Commissioners that the council has one of the highest prosecution rates in the country. It is very supportive of landlords and has a thriving landlord forum. But it also has a "no nonsense" approach to poor quality housing or bad behaviour by landlords.

**Recommendation 6:** We recommend that the council conducts a whole market review of the Private Rented Sector – its scale, quality, rent levels, interactions with the benefits system and partner agencies – with a focus on tenants' perspectives.

**Recommendation 7:** We recommend that, following a PRS review, Brent Council creates and publicises a comprehensive enforcement strategy to raise standards, including for energy efficiency (which addresses fuel poverty) over the years ahead, guided by the recommendations from the recent report from Dr Julie Rugg (for Trust for London).

**Recommendation 8:** The council should work with the GLA to support community and voluntary sector organisations to identify opportunities for community-led housing in Brent.





**Recommendation 9:** We recommend that the actions proposed in the council’s review of housing adaptations be implemented as speedily as possible, with particular regard to those with disabilities living in the private rented sector.

Alongside affordability problems, the lack of security for tenants within the private rented sector can lead to people being evicted from their home. Brent has the second highest eviction rate for renters across London – with 17 possession orders per 1,000 renters.

“It just upsets me. I keep thinking what if they evict us - what am I going to do? It’s just scary, I’m always crying and in distress.”  
(Brent resident)

significantly since 2014-15. The Commission heard that there were currently 2,025 Brent households in temporary accommodation - this is 23rd highest of all local authorities in England (and 13th in London).

“It is one of the most stressful situations when you don’t have shelter... I had pretty severe depression and my boyfriend couldn’t cope with it and we broke up.” (Brent resident)

One of the challenges to housing security in the private rented sector is “no-fault” evictions secured under section 21 of the Housing Act 1988. This enables landlords to gain possession of a tenant’s home even

provide tenants with much greater security around both the tenancy and the level of rent they will pay. The Commission also saw a need for wider government reforms to improve regulation, rights and redress within the private rented sector.

Changes to the level of housing support received by private renters meant many experienced a shortfall between the benefit they received and the rent they owed. In response to the pandemic, the Government reversed some of these cuts. However, due to the benefit cap some families are still experiencing a significant shortfall, making paying the rent extremely difficult. Prior to increases in housing support there were already 643 Brent households who had their benefits capped (8% of London’s total), 250 of whom were capped by over £200 per month.<sup>25</sup> In addition, because of the reliance on the private rented sector in Brent even with Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate increases linked to the 30th percentile rent levels there are more low-income tenants than homes available below that threshold. This means household’s face a shortfall in the benefits intended to meet their rent.

**GOVERNMENT RECOMMENDATION: The Commission calls on government to review its approach to the benefit cap and LHA and discretionary housing payment funding to reduce the severe financial hardship it causes.**

Many Brent residents will have built up rent arrears as their income has fallen during the downturn. This is likely to place them in a very vulnerable position when the Government removes measures temporarily banning evictions. Without support for tenants this could lead to high numbers of residents being evicted.

As the section of this report dealing with welfare highlights in detail, advice services play a critical role supporting residents in difficulty and suffering the effects of poverty. Such services will be even more vital as the stay on evictions ends and as the economic consequences of the downturn mount up. The voluntary sector and the council need to ensure that they are prepared and resourced for the additional demand.

“I am very grateful to them. I didn’t know what I would do and I was worried that I would be homeless again.”  
(Brent resident)

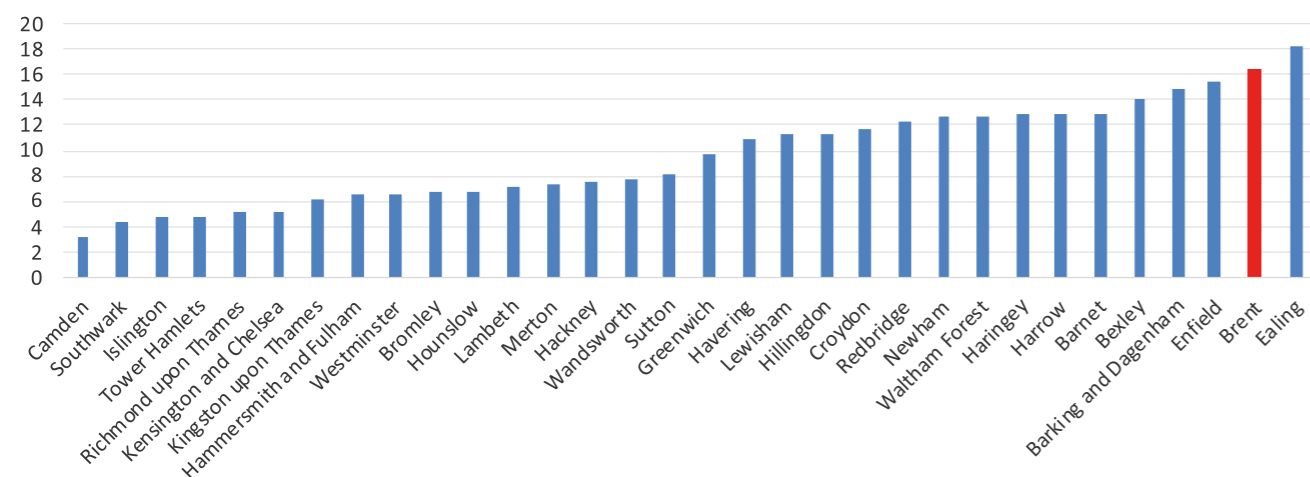
**TACKLING HOMELESSNESS**

The severity of the housing crisis is felt most acutely by those who are homeless or rough sleeping. Brent saw a rapid rise in homelessness since 2010, but this has fallen significantly since 2014/15.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, levels of homelessness in Brent are higher than national rates, and similar in proportion to London as a whole. In addition to the 2,025 households currently in temporary accommodation, there were around 100 people rough sleeping in the Borough in the last three months of 2019 and around 250 people seen sleeping rough over the year 2018/19.

The coronavirus pandemic presents both serious threats and opportunities to tackling homelessness. Its economic impact is set to mean mounting rent arrears and evictions. However, it has also had a remarkable impact on homeless people and their support services in Brent. For the first time everyone sleeping rough, regardless of usual eligibility criteria, was entitled to be housed under Covid protection measures. The Commission believes this offers an unprecedented opportunity to bring people in from the street for good, but to do this on a lasting basis the underlying causes of homelessness need to be addressed alongside ensuring that emergency safety nets are in place.

The Commission believes that the Housing First approach is the most effective way to combat homelessness. The Housing First model prioritises getting people quickly into stable homes. From this point, any other support needs they might have – such as alcohol and drug dependency, physical and/or mental health problems – are addressed through coordinated and intensive support. Central to the concept of Housing First is that permanent housing is provided without a test of having to be ‘housing

Possession orders per 1,000 renting households, 2019



Source: Ministry of Justice, Mortgage and Landlord Possession Actions and GLA, Housing Tenure of Households

A number of people the Commission heard from had past experience of being evicted and we also heard from those currently housed in temporary housing after having been made homeless. Poverty considerably increases the risks of homelessness. Brent has higher than national rates of homelessness, and a similar proportion as for London as a whole. Brent saw a rapid rise since 2010, but numbers have fallen

if they have paid their rent and kept to the terms of the tenancy. The Government is seeking to reform tenancies and address “no fault” evictions; however the Commission believes that if effective action is to be taken to address the issues in the PRS it has examined, rent rises within tenancies should be limited to ensure that landlords do not impose them punitively simply to gain possession. The Commission noted that this would

25 DWP, Stat-Xplore  
26 Crisis Skilight Brent based on CHAIN data





ready'. Furthermore, maintaining the tenancy is not dependent on the tenant using support services. Housing First is built upon the principle that housing is a human right. It focuses on first giving someone immediate access to a settled and secure home. This is placed above goals such as sobriety or abstinence. The model is specifically tailored for homeless people with complex and multiple needs. It is designed to provide choice and control – it gives rights and responsibilities back to people who may have been repeatedly excluded.

**Recommendation 10: We recommend that the council adopt a housing-led approach to all those presenting as homeless (single homeless people and families experiencing homelessness), including with a Housing First offer where appropriate as the default response.**

Brent's local housing company, i4B, provides affordable accommodation to reduce homelessness. The Commission's view is that the current housing market presents i4B with an opportunity to expand its role. With property prices likely to be depressed there could be opportunities for i4B to purchase homes at a lower cost. These additional homes could save the council money, eliminating the costs associated with failed tenancies, homelessness and expensive temporary accommodation. This would also give residents a chance to have permanent high-quality housing and help fulfil the Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan.

## Economy and Jobs

The council has undertaken a lot of work to support the economy and increase job opportunities in the Borough. Pre-pandemic, unemployment in Brent was 4% - a little lower than for London as a whole (4.6%).<sup>27</sup> But most jobs are in less well paid occupations (such as wholesale/retail, health and care, hospitality, warehouse distribution, transportation and food industries). Consequently the median gross full-time earnings of employees in 2018 was below the London average, at £575.50pw.<sup>28</sup> A high proportion of the workforce – 29% - earned less than the London Living Wage<sup>29</sup> (where

Brent scores worse than all but four London boroughs). Most employers are small – 92% have less than nine employees.<sup>30</sup> The pandemic has disproportionately affected Brent with its particular profile of occupations, not least the jobs linked to Wembley Stadium. Commissioners noted that even before the pandemic, work was not a route out of poverty for many of the 30% of Brent residents living in the PRS; rent levels prevented those in occupations paying even the London Living Wage from escaping in-work poverty.

27 Data for the period Oct 2018- Sep 2019, source: Nomis

28 ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, 2018

29 Analysis by the Smith Institute of ONS, Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, Home Geography, 2019 and based on London Living Wage (from Living Wage Foundation) rate at the time - £10.55

30 Brent Council, p5: <https://www.brent.gov.uk/media/16415098/igs-research-base-2019-2040-new-regeneration.pdf>



Relatively modest incomes in Brent contrast with substantially higher living costs, in particular rents for the 30% of residents in the PRS: a couple both earning the London Living Wage for a 40 hour week would fall below the poverty line after paying the monthly rent for the bottom quintile of PRS rents in Brent.

Interventions to reduce poverty within Brent will have to work much harder and will be more costly if large numbers of Brent residents are out of work or in low paid jobs. Prior to the pandemic, the Borough had high levels of residents on poverty pay. This is now coupled with the immediate challenge of high unemployment levels which could well increase rapidly after the end of furloughing. Evidence to date suggests that the pandemic has affected those in lowest paid workers most – both their health and their chances of being furloughed.<sup>31</sup> The pandemic – and government’s response to it – have hit low pay sectors and businesses hard, and some of these were already under severe pressure.

This backdrop makes the challenges harder but also the case for supporting people into decent, well paid work to address poverty even more urgent. The pandemic has shown the vital role key workers in the public and private sectors play, making the case for valuing the contribution of lower paid workers even stronger.

**Overview Recommendation D: We recommend that, as the major employer and the source of so much of the Borough’s spending, Brent Council extends its impressive efforts to secure more and better jobs, especially for its younger citizens.**

The council has identified, and is focusing efforts on, a range of employment issues including low pay, access to good work, skills, a changing economy and health barriers.

Officers told the Commission about how the council is seeking to address these issues by:

- Supporting access to, and improving the quality of, local employment through the use of the planning

system (particularly use of section106 agreements) and inclusion of social value clauses in contracts when the council buys goods and services

- Supporting sectors that generate quality work, including business advice/support and workspace provision
- Helping residents develop their skills through Brent Start (see below) and work with United Colleges Group and the University of Westminster
- Running a range of targeted employment programmes such as the Work and Health Programme, Moving on Up for young black men, and Bright Futures for ex-offenders.

Brent’s Inclusive Growth Strategy 2019-2040 identifies choices to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities of growth in the Borough over the next 20 years. The Commissioners heard of the good progress being made in the implementation of this strategy including supporting women back into work. Key transport activity includes improving current options and establishing new ones, such as the West London Orbital Overground rail project.

The Strategy also sets out 10 key policy areas to support the local economy and employment opportunities. These include:

- Developing and supporting businesses in Brent
- Local enterprise zones for Brent
- Curating a strategic vision for workspace
- A detailed approach to industrial land
- An adult skills strategy
- Developing the circular economy
- Master planning for town centres and high streets
- Supporting women into work
- Implementing a fairness agenda
- Addressing the consequences of Brexit

Commissioners heard that the council accepts the challenges of population growth, at the same time

recognising that the demand for employment uses also have to be met. This puts pressure on scarce land resources. Growth also requires effective planning to ensure there are the homes and infrastructure to support it. The draft Local Plan identifies 8 areas across Brent best suited for new growth because of land use/capacity, transport connectivity and infrastructure. It sets out plans for high quality mixed use environments to deliver the homes, jobs and infrastructure required to support Brent’s sustainable growth. Wembley and Alperton masterplans have helped shaped major regeneration in these areas, including affordable homes and jobs, affordable/flexible workspaces (with priority for local start-ups and microbusinesses), the London Designer Outlet in Wembley and construction jobs for local people. A new masterplan is being developed for the Neasden Stations Growth Area and one is being scoped for Church End. The Commission also noted the regeneration activity in South Kilburn and Harlesden, with a focus on inclusive growth.

Commissioners heard about plans to develop the Old Oak/Park Royal area, particularly in light of delivery of HS2. The Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation (OPDC) are planning authority for this area, which covers parts of the three boroughs of Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham. Established in 2015 by the Mayor of London, the OPDC will drive the development of 25,500 new homes and 65,000 new jobs as part of a transformation project at the heart of West London. Brent supports the growth opportunities, new homes and jobs the regeneration will bring, but the council wants to make sure that local residents and businesses benefit fully. Brent has been successful in lobbying for the OPDC to give greater prominence to the regeneration opportunities at Willesden Junction station and promoting links to Harlesden. This is now given greater priority in the latest iteration of the OPDC local plan.

The council has plans in place to introduce participatory budgeting at a local level and Commissioners were keen that this progressed. We recognised that the effectiveness of such arrangements in reducing poverty will depend upon the voices being heard of those on low incomes. But if representation includes those experiencing poverty, we believe this engagement will enhance the council’s decision-making.

**Recommendation 11:** We recommend that the council makes poverty reduction an explicit part of the council’s current and future economic development strategies, with a clear set of poverty reduction targets.

**Recommendation 12:** We are pleased that the Council is introducing participatory budgeting and recommend that, with proper representation from those experiencing poverty, this should be treated as a key element of engagement and ownership of decisions at the neighbourhood level.

**Recommendation 13:** With the likely further decline in retail post-Covid, we recommend the council work with the GLA and central government to regenerate its high streets, support job creation and create affordable workspace, and places for community hubs, while enhancing the local environment.

It was suggested to the Commission that the council should seek to attract one or more major businesses who could be attracted by the plentiful office facilities and the easy access to central London. Equally, Brent offers an excellent venue for cultural institutions, having already attracted the London Philharmonic Orchestra and other significant arts bodies. However, uncertainties hang over the future of office as well as retail buildings and the Commission views this proposal as one for the longer term.

## EMPLOYMENT

Despite Brent making significant strides to reduce the number of jobseekers, the pandemic is leading to rapid growth in unemployment. Those the Commission heard from who were unemployed wanted to work. It is seen as a route out of poverty which also provides opportunities for social interaction and personal fulfilment. There was evident frustration amongst residents unable to work because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The numbers of residents out of work has risen steeply. Evidence from previous recessions shows that the youngest in society are affected heavily. We also know that the employment, financial and emotional scarring effects of being unemployed last many years

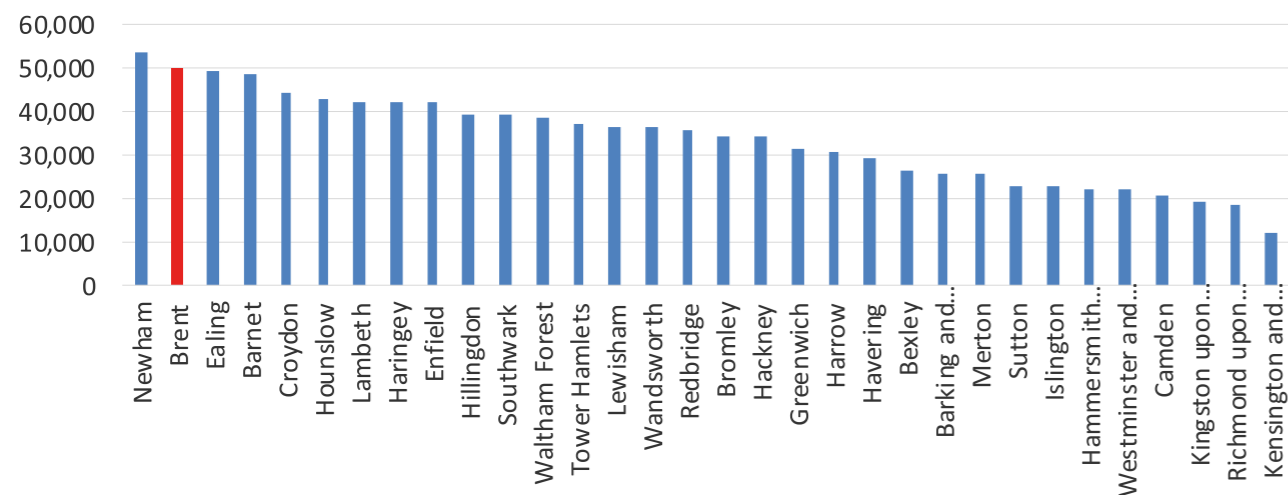
<sup>31</sup> HMRC, Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme Official Statistics, 11 June 2020; ONS, Coronavirus (COVID-19) related deaths by occupation, England and Wales: deaths registered up to and including 20 April 2020



after a downturn.<sup>32</sup> The numbers of jobs at risk is also considerable. Figures from HMRC show that in absolute terms, the number of jobs furloughed in Brent is the second highest across London.

spoke to felt that a lack of appropriate qualifications, skills and experience were barriers to securing such work, particularly for those who have recently left full-time education or are looking for a mid-life career

### Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) furloughed employments by local authority



Much will depend on the effectiveness of central government's gradual end to the job retention scheme. The recovery will also require active labour market policies to support people into work or training.

change. It was voiced on a number occasions that although Brent's school results were good, this was not translated into better employment prospects and support was required for people to make the move from education to work.

The coronavirus response is disproportionately impacting young people,<sup>33</sup> but older workers are also likely to struggle to find work if they are made redundant. Those the Commission heard from who were in work at the time had aspirations for better jobs with higher pay, greater security and career progression opportunities. Those the Commission

*"I haven't been to uni and that's a detriment to my CV."  
(Brent resident)*

32 IFS, Recessions have a lasting impact on employment and pay of young adults – but parents can provide an important safety net (2017)

33 Resolution Foundation, Young workers in the coronavirus crisis (2020)

### DARREN'S STORY\*

Darren is 53 and lives with his wife and 12-year-old child. Darren is self-employed. He also has three adult children, two of whom have returned from university since coronavirus. They have lived in the same council house for 15 years and Darren has always lived in Brent. He is happy where he lives and with the council as his landlord:

"The council has been as good as gold if we've had a [housing] problem."

Darren works as a self-employed plumber and maintenance engineer, but he hasn't been getting much work for the past few years and is currently not working at all due to the pandemic. His wife is long-term unemployed due to having chronic anxiety. The family receives working and Child Tax Credits, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Relief. Despite these benefits, money is very tight, particularly since the lockdown as there are two more children living at home and Darren is not able to work. However, they have actually been struggling for the past five years due to Darren's lack of work. The family have no savings and have to do without. Darren cannot afford to buy himself the new trainers that he needs, they do not go away for family holidays and they have not been able to pay for school trips for their youngest child.

"School trips are out which makes me sad. My daughter tells me that she doesn't want to go but I know she's just saying that because she knows we can't afford it."

"We haven't had a proper holiday in over 3 years. Our holiday last year was a day trip to Margate and I'm not even joking."

Darren went into the family business when he was 16 and learned on the job rather than doing any formal training. He eventually went into partnership with his cousin, who then left the business five years ago to move abroad. Since then, Darren has been struggling to maintain the business as the industry has changed and to get decent contracts requires him to be qualified with City & Guilds which would cost him around £6,000, which he cannot afford. As a result, he is now under-employed.

"I pick up jobs where and when I can."

Darren's employment situation has caused him a lot of stress as he is the only income earner in his family. He ended up experiencing anxiety and depression and was under mental healthcare for 18 months, receiving medication and counselling, before he recovered.

He doesn't want to continue in the building trade as he feels like he is too old for it. He would ideally like to retrain to do something different like teaching, counselling or mentoring. Darren feels trapped in his current job as he lacks the finances not just for retraining but also to support the family while he is not working. What he feels would help him is financial support to retrain, along with employment-related advice and coaching.

"The body breaks down - I've got a bad back, bad knees. It's hard work on building sites now."

"I am not aware of any support. I wish I did as I'd take it up because I need to do something. I've been saying this for two years and I'm still in the same boat. I can't make a change unless I can keep the family going."

"If you go to these job centres it's all on computers but I like to speak to someone, like a mentor to encourage me and give me a way out... These things may be out there but people aren't aware of it. They're a well-kept secret."

Darren feels that there was a missed opportunity to have been signposted towards such support by the mental health services as his employment problems were the root cause of his mental health problems.

\*names have been changed



Investment in specialist skills training and job coaching, along with associated financial support, will be needed even more after the pandemic to enable Brent residents to transition into the workforce (for those not working currently but who wish to) or get a better job (for those with aspirations to improve their job or earnings). It was felt by those the Commission heard from that in general, Jobcentre Plus was not fulfilling this role sufficiently at present.

The council already steps into this role to raise standards of pay and employment and has an apprenticeship programme, but now would be the time to examine if more could be done. The Commission understands from the council that this is being examined as part of its approach to community wealth building. The Commission noted that the council spends £400m on services provided by third parties, highlighting the important role public procurement can play.

“Someone to send me in a direction of a new career, to help me and enable me. Someone I could be really honest with and could talk to, almost like a life coach.” (Brent resident)

**Recommendation 15:** We recommend that the council extends the use of its procurement powers to secure more good quality apprenticeships and social value from council contracts (using the Social Value Act and, where applicable, section 106 agreements), including by making contracts conditional on payment of the London Living Wage (e.g. through the West London Alliance partnership with neighbouring boroughs).

**Recommendation 14:** We recommend that the council uses its influence to maximise the help provided by careers services for those moving from school to work, and where appropriate, the council encourages take up of the Government’s “Kickstart Scheme”.

**SYED’S STORY\***

Syed is 18 and lives with his parents. He is a student and has lived in the same one-bedroom council flat all his life.

Syed is at college and before lockdown he was working in a cinema for around four hours a week. His father works as a relief security officer with an agency and only gets work some of the time. His mother does not work due to a bladder illness. Syed thinks his parents receive benefits but is not sure which ones.

The family has struggled financially as long as he can remember. He qualified for free school meals when he was at school. When he was growing up, Syed often did not get what he wanted for occasions like birthdays, Christmas and Eid and that they could not go out to celebrate.

“I wouldn’t even ask [for an expensive present] knowing the situation and the struggles we were going through.”

Luckily Syed did not miss out on school trips and extra-curricular activities like the football club as they were funded for him by the school or club. However, his family needed to borrow money from a relative to equip him with the school bag, books and clothes he needed when he went to college.

Currently, during lockdown his father has no work even though as a security guard he is regarded as a key worker. This is because he works as relief cover only and there is a bank of agency staff. So, things have become even tougher.

The family economises as much as they can. They don’t eat meat regularly, and choose ‘value’ grocery items. They go to charity shops to get clothes and also try to minimise their household energy use. Even so, they are often late with bills and

have received letters with threats of eviction or court action.

“It feels tough to see my parents struggle but we get through it together.”

He is currently studying for B-Tech at college but feels in limbo as he does not know his grades due to coronavirus.

“I’m clueless, lost as to what’s going on. It’s stressful.”

He has aspirations to go to university. He would like to do a technology-related degree and has discussed this with his father as a route into a good job. He says that his parents both place a high emphasis on education. Syed is motivated to get good grades and continue with his studies not just for himself but also to help his family financially.

“I want to change the life of my family for the better.”

He is also unaware of what support is available that could be relevant to him now, apart from student loans. However, when Syed was growing up a local youth group was very important to him.

“It kept us from doing bad things like getting into gangs and drug dealing.”

Some of his friends got involved in criminal activity but Syed feels the youth club helped him to resist this, as did his parents’ strong influence and the family’s Muslim faith which he regards as “a big part of life”.

\*names have been changed

The council delivers a range of services supporting residents into work and improving people’s employment prospects. These include:

- Brent Works - which supports recruitment to social care, police, NHS call handlers, construction and other roles.
- Brent Works and Brent Start - these offer careers advice and employability skill sessions, including CV writing and interview skills, linked to a digital skills short course for those that need it. During the pandemic, Brent Start has engaged over 600 residents via online platforms such as Google Classrooms, Zoom and WhatsApp, across its provision in ESOL, English, Maths, Digital Skills, Childcare and community-based courses. To help close the digital divide, Brent Start offers free courses on topics such as searching for jobs online, completing documents online and Word formatting. During 2019/20 236 people availed of these courses; 1,120 enrolments are planned for 2020.
- Network Homes and Brent Council have teamed up to launch an Apprenticeship Academy, a one-stop apprentice hub for the Borough’s small and medium enterprises (SMEs), not-for-profit organisations and apprentices. The package includes support for both employers and apprentices.
- The Moving on Up project supports young black men into employment. This has been delivering

opportunities since January 2020, having engaged 45 young black men and supported 11 into jobs. The project will be working with the Metropolitan Police to provide a webinar for participants on working in the police and helping them achieve their aims of improving diversity in their workforce. The project is also working on further engagement with employers, as well as with the GLA and others, to gain support for the project.

- The Living Room, Shaw Trust (Work and Health Programme), and the Bright Futures project to support ex-offenders which have all been providing remote support to their clients to help them to access employment, training, and financial inclusion support.

Brent Start has recently secured two tranches of funding. Firstly, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) awarded £127,555 for supporting English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in community settings. The service will be targeting communities where there is a particular need. It will deliver taught sessions and social mixing clubs (such as food clubs) where conversational skills will be learned and confidence built. Childcare will be provided to support parents. The programme will also provide employability support to all participants, who will then be able to access further support when the sessions finish. This is welcomed particularly as the





lack of English was also identified by those we spoke to as a barrier to accessing support and local services. A high proportion of Brent's residents have English as a second language.<sup>34</sup> Nationally, evidence suggests that people whose main language at home is English are more likely to be employed and have higher average earnings.<sup>35</sup>

The second funding tranche of £40,000 comes from the Greater London Authority's Skills for Londoners Covid-19 Response Fund. This is to enable Brent Start to increase on-line delivery and introduce a "Loan and Learn" scheme. This will provide free of charge, loaned hardware to residents who are struggling to engage in the current climate of learning at a distance. It will increase the digital infrastructure of the borough by providing learners with laptops, iPads, tablets, dongles or sim cards for internet access.

It is also encouraging to hear that Brent Works are engaging with Park Royal employers, to explore employment opportunities for local people. Funding has recently been secured from the HS2 fund to create a new Employment and Skills Hub at Park Royal to offer services in the industrial estate. A Hub Coordinator is being recruited by the OPDC; boroughs including Brent and Jobcentre Plus are offering in-kind officer time to support the new service.

The Commission noted that the council's efforts to raise educational achievement of, in particular, boys of Black Caribbean heritage, were showing positive results. And we commend Brent's investment, with the Trust for London, to develop the confidence, skills and access to employment in this area. The death of George Floyd while the Commission was meeting, followed by the Black Lives Matter campaign, were powerful reminders of the injustices and inequalities faced by our black communities. We strongly support the Brent Black Community Action Plan<sup>36</sup> and recommend further strengthening of the links with the Young Brent Foundation and others in the voluntary and community sector.

<sup>34</sup> According to the 2011 census 37% of Brent residents aged 3+ English was not their main language. This compared with 22% for London as a whole.

<sup>35</sup> The Migration Observatory, English language use and proficiency of migrants in the UK, 2019

<sup>36</sup> Full Council – 13 July 2020

**Recommendation 16:** We strongly support the Brent Black Community Action Plan and we recommend strengthening of the links with the CVS and Young Brent Foundation and others in the voluntary and community sector.

Maximising job opportunities and helping the local economy to recover from the downturn will require more than the direct actions of the council as an employer and commissioner of services. So-called anchor institutions are major local employers and invested in the community for the long term. These employers have a role too. Efforts by these employers would not only help increase employment opportunities but help support the local economy on which they rely.

Some of the Borough's major employers will be having a harder time than others. Local economies are going through a period of transition. The retail sector which has been affected by the lockdown was already facing competition from on-line retail and is having to adapt to changing consumer preferences. This is a concern for Brent and poverty reduction programmes. The Brent job market is dominated by those working in wholesale and retail, which accounted for around one in five jobs locally. Government data show that this sector has seen the highest number of jobs furloughed.<sup>37</sup>

This transition to a new kind of economy has been hastened by the pandemic but was already an underlying trend. Making the most of the opportunities that the new economy has to offer is already part of the council's economic development strategy. The Commission's view was that success should not be measured by economic growth alone and it commends the council's emphasis of poverty reduction in its regeneration strategy. Few would see a situation where poverty rises as a mark of an economy developing for the better. The current economic downturn does demand a redoubling of efforts, with targets for what the Borough aims to achieve after the downturn.

**Recommendation 17:** We recommend that the council extends its offer, to support those with disabilities into employment and gives more publicity to the work it is doing.

<sup>37</sup> HMRC, Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) Statistics: May 2020

<sup>38</sup> See Andy Haldane's speech to the TUC in 2015

**Recommendation 18:** We recommend that the delays caused by Covid-19 to Brent's imaginative programme as the London Borough of Culture be used to give extra focus to the opportunities for engaging young people, particularly those from BAME communities, in activities that raise aspirations and improve employment prospects.

One aspect of the new economy will be the change in the way we work and consume. Commissioners heard how the council and its partners have been working successfully at a neighbourhood level to improve the high street offer. With the pandemic restrictions the trend has been towards shopping locally for many and this offers an opportunity to reinvigorate local high streets.

The lockdown has shown how parts of the economy enabled by new technology can still function with employees working from home. This could spur a move away from a central London-centric approach to the London economy, with a stronger economic role for outer London boroughs like Brent. There is an opportunity now to support people working locally by enhancing the local office and hot desking offer, but also the complementary local services that workers value. Making it easier for Brent residents to work closer to home could provide a significant boost to the borough's day-time economy and create new job opportunities.

The nature of work itself is also changing. Increased automation is set to change the way we work, and predictions from the Bank of England and others suggest that lower paid occupations are likely to see the biggest changes.<sup>38</sup> If residents are to make the most of new job opportunities and not be left behind in the future jobs market, investment will be needed in skills and training.

Addressing digital inclusion is critical to residents' prospects; as Brent's Digital Strategy 2019-23 notes, tackling digital exclusion is critical to residents' interaction with public services. Given this, the Strategy aims to better support local people and transform the experience of tenants and leaseholders by developing technical solutions to engage and support some of Brent's most vulnerable residents, young and old. This





is encouraging, as a number of residents we spoke to felt digitally excluded.

“I’m not computer literate. It’s like not being able to read or write these days, like you’re a thick dinosaur.” (Brent resident)

The pandemic has further highlighted the degree to which digital exclusion is affecting those on low incomes. Having lost their jobs due to the pandemic, many people who do not own a smart phone and have no access to the internet have been unable to apply for Universal Credit as applications for this benefit can only be made online.

Furthermore, many children are unable to do their schoolwork/homework,<sup>39</sup> putting them at a significant disadvantage compared to those with the necessary technical devices and online accessibility. This might result in them falling behind in their education, impact

their future job prospects and ultimately also act as a break on the productivity of the Borough’s economy.

The council’s Borough Plan<sup>40</sup> promises to enable more residents to get online as well as working with the voluntary and community sector. The Commission welcomes these aspirations and were keen that the pace of implementation was increased.

**Recommendation 19:** We recommend that the council sets out clearly how it intends work with the community and voluntary sector in tackling digital exclusion, and how it intends to ensure residents can operate online, including using digital hotspots created on estates and local safe spaces.

Alongside skills, transport infrastructure is an essential part of supporting local growth. Physical access to jobs, education and services relies on adequate transport system. Those on poorest incomes are traditionally most reliant on public transport and in particular on bus travel.

Transport is a major source of household spending.

The inaccessibility of much public transport falls heavily on disabled people. Sedentary lifestyles are a major contribution to ill health. Poorer Londoners are much more likely to bear the brunt of air pollution, noise pollution and more likely to be injured and killed in traffic accidents. Poorer communities have most to gain from interventions that calm traffic and improve local liveability, with for example, play spaces, green infrastructure. The council has recently launched its active travel plans and residents are being called on to nominate potential locations for wider pavements, cycle lanes, and other measures to help make active travel easier and safer in Brent.

If an outer London borough like Brent is to grow and prosper it will need adequate transport infrastructure, particularly to give residents of deprived areas access to places likely to see job growth. Meeting the ambition of balancing growth across the capital will require examining the way public transport operates. The importance of public transport in achieving that ambition is much greater in London, because so many commuters and residents use Transport for London (TfL) services to get about. This especially true of bus services for those on lower incomes. The Mayor has promised a review of outer London bus services, which could help enhance that role, but it has yet to materialise.

London’s much-admired public transport system will need more funding in the medium to longer term as the pandemic has left a considerable hole in TfL finances while Londoners have stayed at home. The challenge for Brent is to ensure that if TfL does have to cut services, these cuts do not disproportionately impact either bus routes or outer London areas such as Brent. The Commission noted the proposition for free public transport in London for the under-18’s to be withdrawn. Clearly it is not always practical for young people to walk or cycle to school or college. Local authorities will have a statutory duty, in some circumstances, to fund these travel costs in place of Transport for London. This will add to the burden on councils at a very difficult time, as well as adversely affecting the educational prospects of those on low incomes and the household finances of families with children.

Investing in public transport will also be critical to meeting the council’s climate change ambitions. Brent Council has declared a climate emergency and the Mayor is committed to ensuring London is carbon neutral within a decade. The pandemic may have reduced the level of journeys we have taken, but as restrictions are lifted people may turn from public transport to car use for health reasons. This would have a detrimental impact on the level of transport services that poorer people are more reliant on. It would also risk stalling progress on reducing pollution. Research has shown that poorest communities are exposed to the highest level of air pollution.<sup>41</sup> Continued efforts are therefore required to boost active and sustainable transport options and reduce car use.

With people being discouraged from using public transport, Transport for London (TfL) has predicted a 10-fold increase in cycle traffic and a five-fold increase in pedestrian numbers as lockdown eases.

**GLA RECOMMENDATION: The Commission recommends that the GLA fast-tracks its review of outer London bus services to ensure TfL services are best serving outer London areas and poorer outer London residents in places like Brent. The Commission recommends that Brent Council works with other outer London authorities to make the case to the Mayor and TfL for continued investment in outer London public transport services.**

**GOVERNMENT RECOMMENDATION: The Commission calls on the Government not to end free under 18s travel and for the GLA and all London Councils to lobby government to reconsider.**

Measures to combat unemployment in the wake of the pandemic and to support future jobs growth are needed to ensure that there is an adequate supply of local jobs and to maximise the number of Brent residents in work. However, while being in work reduces the risks of being in poverty, it doesn’t eradicate it. In recent years there has been a rapid growth in “in-work poverty”. Nationally over half of

39 Research during the lockdown found that a 20% of children on free school meals have no access to a computer at home, this compares with 7% for other children – see Green, F Schoolwork in lockdown: new evidence on the epidemic of educational poverty (LLAKES, 2020)

40 Borough Plan 2019-2023

41 GLA, Health and exposure to pollution - <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/environment/pollution-and-air-quality/health-and-exposure-pollution>



households in poverty have a working member.<sup>42</sup>

One issue underpinning in-work poverty is low pay. Brent has faced the long-standing challenge of poverty pay among Borough residents. One in three workers are paid below the London Living Wage. The Commission commends Brent Council for being an accredited London Living Wage employer, which it has been since 2013. The Commission also noted that the Borough has a range of incentives to encourage business to become accredited, including the first business rates discount in the UK for accredited employers. Nevertheless, more still could be done to tackle low pay and promote the living wage.

**Recommendation 20:** We recommend that Brent goes further in its efforts to encourage fair remuneration for employees: by insisting on contractors requiring their sub-contractors to pay the London Living Wage; for private sector residential and care homes to pay the LLW where the council is paying residents' fees; by considering the designation of specific locations as "Living Wage Places"; and by persuading accredited employers to address the need for flexibility in employment with contracts that guarantee minimum hours.

**Recommendation 21:** We recommend that Brent Council signs up to the Good Work Standard and uses its convening power to bring together anchor employers to address low paid, low hours employment contracts in Brent and to guarantee improved terms (e.g. a minimum of sixteen hours a week and the right to notice periods of at least four weeks for shifts).

**Recommendation 22:** We recommend that the council expands its employment support packages to help tackle low wages and insecure work conditions.

"I pick up jobs where and when I can. But I've got a bad back, bad knees and its hard work on building sites now." (Brent resident)

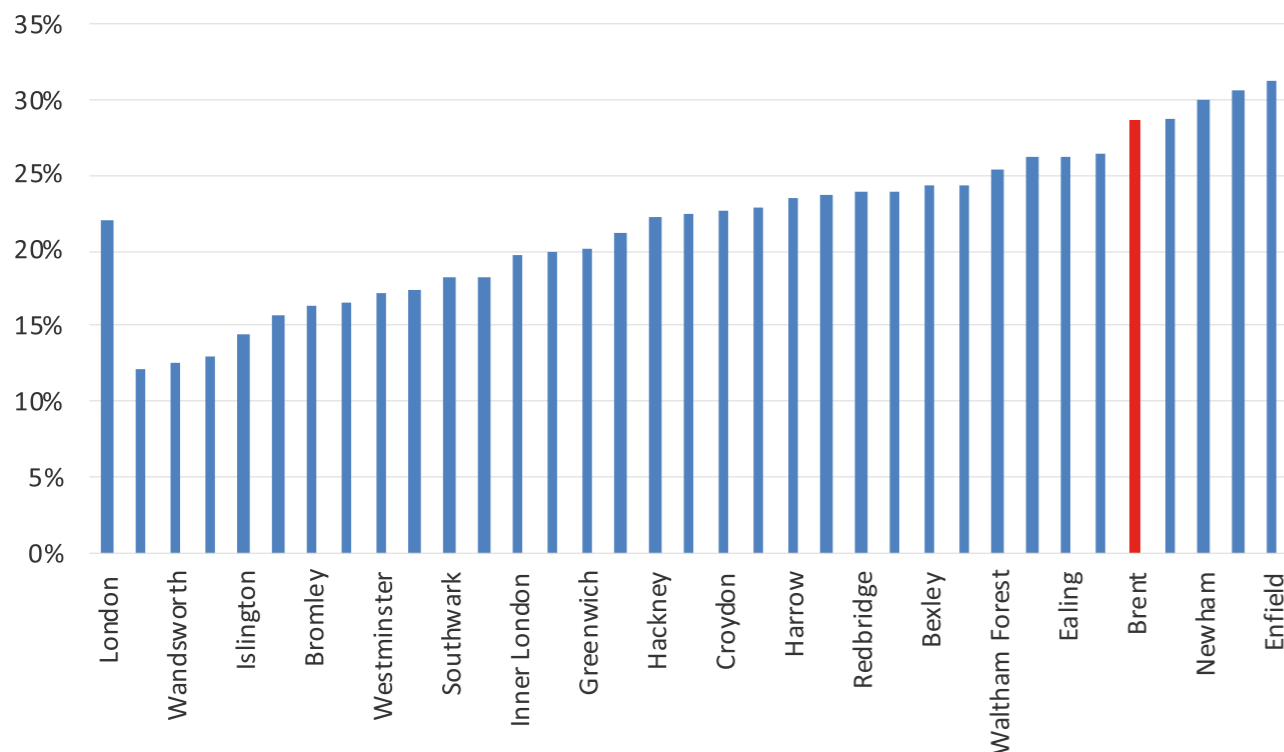
Making the most of the job opportunities within the Borough and helping families and children exit poverty will require further efforts to increase affordable childcare.

Evidence suggests that having two parents in work reduces the risk of poverty.<sup>43</sup> However, the Commission heard evidence that one of the reasons Brent residents struggle to work or secure additional hours is the lack of affordable childcare. The Commission noted that challenges for lower paid workers are often around atypical working hours and finding childcare that matches their working hours. The lack of affordable childcare will also act as a constraint on the growth of the local economy into the future and it is rightly an essential component of the Borough's Economic Development Strategy. The Strategy highlights the need to get parents into work and in particular promoting childcare options; encouraging local businesses to provide flexible offers; and supporting return to work apprenticeships. The Strategy also includes the creation of a Charter for Good Work accreditation; improving the quality of less secure employment; and stronger regulation of, and enforcement against, bad practices.

The Commission was concerned to hear that some providers of childcare facilities were facing financial difficulty as a result of the lockdown. While maintained nurseries may be supported, and the council was operating important services through its Childrens Centres, the Commission was keen to avoid a loss of affordable childcare post-Covid.

**Recommendation 23:** We recommend that the council explores the opportunities for action to support affordable childcare provision, considering loans or grants to both providers and parents that would enable moves into employment in the aftermath of Covid-19.

### Proportion of employees earning below the London Living Wage



Source: Analysis of ONS, Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, Home Geography, 2019 and based on London Living Wage (from Living Wage Foundation) rate at the time - £10.55.

The precarious nature of work is also a cause of financial instability. The low pay/no pay cycle where people are in and out of work can lead to persistent periods in poverty.<sup>43</sup> Zero hours contracts can make planning and budgeting almost impossible. Self-employment is another cause of insecurity and associated with poverty. In Brent there are much higher rates of self-employment than elsewhere (16% of the working age population, compared with 13.2% for London as a whole and 10.9% for the UK).<sup>44</sup> Worryingly, the Commission heard from some low-income self-employed residents whose businesses were struggling because of the economic downturn.

Addressing the nature and the quality of the work is therefore an essential component in reducing poverty. Good work should not only address the financial issues around security and pay levels but also the quality of lower paid residents working lives, covering opportunities for progression, voice and autonomy in the workplace. The Commission noted that the Mayor had launched the Good Work Standard precisely to promote higher standards in some of these areas and recognise those employers with good practices.

"I don't like that every month I have different earnings. If I had a stable amount I could work-out how much I could spend and save." (Brent resident)

<sup>43</sup> See for example: Goulden, C Cycles of poverty, unemployment and low pay (JRF, 2010)

<sup>44</sup> Nomis

<sup>45</sup> DWP, Households Below Average Income, 2018/19

<sup>42</sup> DWP, Households Below Average Income, 2018/19



Working age people with a disability are more likely to face poverty than those without a disability. The Commission heard from Brent residents who struggle to work because they have a disability or long-term health condition which limits what jobs they can do and restricts their employment prospects. Some found they could not work, but struggled to qualify for benefit payments. Evidence from Inclusion London shows that disabled people in the UK face £583 in additional monthly costs, requiring 50% of their income to cover these costs;

20% of disabled people face monthly costs of £1,000 or more. Some 37% of Londoners living in a household that includes a disabled person are in poverty, compared to 24% of those in households that don't.

“I’m doing all I can to get myself sorted and into work, but I have health issues.” (Brent resident)

### JOAN’S STORY\*

Joan was born in France but she has been living in the UK for many years and in Brent for the past four. She currently lives alone.

She has a number of health conditions including IBS, GERD and uterine fibroids, which required surgery. She is also gluten intolerant (which requires her to eat gluten-free food) and is currently being tested for coeliac disease. These conditions mean she struggles to find suitable jobs and is currently unemployed. Her last job was as a teaching assistant.

Joan receives UC but finds it challenging to budget since this is only paid once a month and she is on a capped rate which makes it difficult for her to make ends meet. As a result, Joan has needed to use food banks several times in the past year. She can't afford basic clothing items such as underwear and sometimes is unable even to buy sanitary products. She is also in arrears in several areas including Council Tax and broadband.

She applied for Personal Independence Payment (PIP), but was unsuccessful but does not know if she is entitled to appeal this or, if she is, how she would go about this.

“It’s ridiculous because I was told I was entitled to it.”

Her main priority is to get back into work in order to improve her financial situation, but she is limited in what she is able to do due to her health conditions. This is causing her a lot of stress as she can't readily identify a way out.

“It’s a nightmare at the moment. Everything is just a mess. It’s very insecure. It’s affected my health. I worry a lot and I get anxious... God knows how I’m going to get my way out of this.”

Joan had major issues with her previous accommodation but managed to be rehoused locally, in a flat she is happy in, through the intervention of a local advice service that she was referred to by another agency. Her GP is also very supportive and has given her dietary advice and referred her to a gym for exercise and physio treatment.

On the other hand, she perceives that Jobcentre Plus has been less helpful and that its staff are just interested in getting her into any job and that they are not sufficiently understanding of her health issues or her desire to pursue a specific career (as an investment adviser).

“I’m doing all I can to get myself sorted and into work but I have health issues... I feel that my job coach is always disappointed but I’m doing what I can, what I’m supposed to be doing. They can see in my journal how many jobs I am applying for.”

She feels she would benefit from specialist job coaching and financial assistance with training, neither of which she is receiving currently. In addition, she would welcome advice on how to appeal the PIP decision.

\*names have been changed

The Commission heard that the Shaw Trust were delivering the Work and Health Programme across West London (which covers seven boroughs, including Brent). They offer an intensive level of support for individuals with greater barriers to work including common mental health issues (e.g. stress, depression, and anxiety), physical barriers, and disabilities. They offer 18 months of support to individuals, including access to training, volunteering, counselling, and job search activity. Before the pandemic the Shaw Trust were co-locating at the Civic Centre and Community Hubs and had also agreed to co-locate at GP surgeries. This is an important stream of work that needs to continue.

Commissioners also heard that the council was a level 2 Disability Confident Employer and is committed to ensuring that those with disabilities are fully supported into employment in the council and partner

organisations. Feedback from Brent's Disability Forum highlighted the need to close the digital gap and put in place IT support packages for those with disabilities. Examples included increasing confidence in using cashless payment systems.

**Recommendation 24:** We recommend that the council develops a bespoke digital offer and support for those with disabilities so that they can easily access services remotely and gain confidence in areas such as cashless payments, recognising that this could lower spending, enable access to benefits, and applications for support.

**Recommendation 25:** We recommend that the council uses its influence to encourage businesses to follow the lead of the council and become Disability Confident Employers.

## Tackling Financial Exclusion and Local Welfare

Addressing financial exclusion is one of the council's priority areas of work, based on recognition that some people, either by choice or lack of access, find themselves excluded from mainstream financial products and services and that any that are available are on disadvantageous terms. The council also recognises the importance of helping people to build their financial capability and resilience, financial literacy and financial health.

Financial services play an important part in people's everyday lives. Most people have bank accounts, into which regular salaries, wages or benefits payments are made, and from which bills are paid. People rely on mortgages to buy a home, savings and pensions to plan for the future and build resilience in case of an unexpected expense. Many people also have insurance policies to safeguard their home, possessions, income in case of illness, injury or death. However, this is not the case for everyone.

The council has set itself the following strategic objectives to tackle financial exclusion - to:

- Help people to move from benefits to sustainable employment
- Help people overcome high levels of debt and promote responsible borrowing
- Encourage people to build their awareness of

### financial services and make appropriate choices with their finances

A range of services are being delivered across the Borough to tackle financial exclusion. Many provide debt and money management advice, welfare reform and benefit assistance, skills for employment and life, and into-work support.

The roll-out of Brent's Community Hub model has played an increasingly key role in ensuring that services to tackle financial exclusion are effectively coordinated and delivered across the Borough. There are four Hubs in localities across Brent, each with a service offer that is tailored to local needs and is jointly delivered by council officers and partner organisations.

As a result of low incomes, most of the residents that the Commission spoke to had suffered from problem debt at one time or another. Many were in the precarious position of not being able to cope with a sudden expense or a change in income and the data shows that a large proportion of residents have very limited savings. This means that many residents take on debt to cope with a short-term financial shock, but their low income means that they struggle to service or pay back the loan. This is a cause of both financial and emotional distress. Brent residents the Commission heard from described this vicious cycle and the emotional stress it causes people.



The financial shock caused by the coronavirus pandemic has been sudden and has extended and intensified problem debt and arrears in the Borough. The council has offered emergency assistance to help people affected.

Alongside measures to increase income, the Commission heard from residents about the need to build up financial resilience and capabilities, increase access to affordable credit and access to support and advice. The Commission noted how partnership working between the council and the voluntary sector was focused on people getting the support they needed and that plans were in place to extend this further including working with a local credit union to offer support.

### PROBLEM DEBT AND FINANCIAL EXCLUSION IN BRENT

Research for the GLA found that around half of residents in Brent and Harrow had savings under £1,500. Over a quarter of those with loans or credit agreements stated that these were a heavy burden. One in fourteen were in arrears with household bills, while 3 per cent did not have a bank or building society account.<sup>46</sup> Evidence shows financial hardship caused by problem debt is experienced most by those on low incomes.<sup>47</sup>

Most of the low-income Brent residents that the Commission heard from reported having fallen into arrears with at least some of their personal or household bills over the preceding year. Some were able to keep on top of this by juggling payments, using an overdraft, borrowing from family or friends, or arranging a repayment plan with creditors. However, others had debts that they are struggling to manage.

“I’m always behind. I speak to them all the time and explain what I earn and how much I can pay”. (Brent resident)

46 GLA, Survey of Londoners 2018-19 (2019) – data split by London Assembly constituency area

47 See Hood, A et al Problem debt and low-income households (IFS, 2018) – they find that one in five individuals on low incomes who are servicing debt report that it is a heavy burden compared with one in twenty amongst those in the top income bracket

48 Not for profit registered charity based in Brent

“The debts are mounting up fast again and there’s no way I can clear them”. (Brent resident)

Those whose incomes are insufficient to cover their regular expenses were particularly at risk of having problem debt. The Commission also heard of problems with benefits payments (such as delays in payment, the requirement to repay loans or overpayments or failed claims e.g. for Personal Independence Payment) which contributed to indebtedness in some cases.

Many of the residents we heard from with problem debt could not see any way out of their situation, which causes them considerable stress and anxiety. For some, debt recovery action by one or more of their creditors had escalated and they were currently subject to court proceedings or at risk of eviction due to rent arrears. Some residents described the variability in creditors’ response to indebtedness:

“It just upsets me. I keep thinking what if they evict us - what am I going to do? It’s just scary, I’m always crying and in distress.” (Brent resident)

Although many people in this situation could benefit from specialist debt advice, there was low awareness of what was available and the use of such advice by those we spoke to was limited. There also appeared to be an unmet need for income maximisation advice and for support for people applying for benefits (such as PIP) or for challenging Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) decisions where previous applications had failed. Commissioners noted services being offered by voluntary sector organisations to support residents facing these challenges with positive outcomes as a result, as illustrated by the following two case studies from Step Up Hub.<sup>48</sup>

### ANAN’S STORY\* - STEP UP HUB

Anan came to Step Up Hub initially with a query relating to an alleged Housing Benefit overpayment and various confusing/contradictory communications she had received, including one letter stating that she owed £3000.

Anan’s first language is not English and she was sure she did not receive the money in the first place she found the letters very confusing and upsetting. As Anan only worked part time, she had no means to pay it back. It turned out that there had been an error. Step Up Hub staff supported Anan resolve the problem by contacting the council, and advised and supported Anan to raise the issue with them online. The council looked into the matter and found that the overpayment had been paid to the landlord, not Anan. Anan received a letter stating that no repayment was due. Step Hub continues to support Anan and is currently assisting her to challenge a DWP decision regarding her claim for PIP.

### ROB’S STORY\*

Rob came to Step Up Hub via the Brent Community Hubs Partnership. Rob is disabled (with physical and mental-health impairments) and was struggling financially. He was out of work and claiming Universal Credit (UC), but due to the benefit cap and various outstanding fees, fines and repayments showing in his UC online journal, he was left with no income at all.

This situation had lasted for several weeks and things were becoming very difficult for Rob. He could not afford to buy food to feed himself, and was reliant on intermittent ‘hand-outs’ from friends. He was unable to continue paying his energy bills and worried that he would get cut off shortly.

Step Up Hub referred Rob to a local food-bank so that he could get a supply of food, supported him to get a fuel voucher, and assisted with an online application for a Local Welfare Assistance grant to cover essential living costs. The Step Up Hub gave Rob information about places in the Borough that provided free hot meals and helped him to query a DWP decision over his UC payments so that his fines and repayments could be broken down into more realistic repayments. Step Up Hub also assisted Rob to apply for PIP. Until then he had not been aware of the benefit. Step Up Hub helped him fill out the form as he was unable to do so himself due to an impairment in his hand.

\*names have been changed

Challenges around preventing the build-up of debt, managing problem debt and debt recovery are set to become more acute because of the pandemic. StepChange Debt Charity have warned that nationally 4.6m people could accumulate £6bn of arrears and debt.<sup>49</sup> While measures have been put in place to temporarily stop evictions and the use of bailiffs, these will end. Many of the measures that will now have to be taken must be reviewed by policy-makers across all sectors, to ensure that the right measures are in place to protect people from the worst financial impacts of the pandemic. The Commission heard from Brent Council about what it is doing to address the growing and increasingly worrying concerns about increasing debt levels, including Council Tax arrears and emergency loans. This includes working with Citizens

Advice Brent and other agencies as well as signposting residents using the Hub model.

It was noted that residents on low incomes rely on local support and advice services and this demand would increase because of the economic fallout from the pandemic. When it comes to the sensitive issue of money advice the Commission felt there was sometimes an issue of potential users’ trust of authorities, in light of cuts to benefits and local services - and especially as local authorities were sometimes the creditor.

**Recommendation 26: We recognise that post-Covid there will be problems with debt for many households and we recommend that Brent puts**

49 StepChange, Coronavirus and personal debt: a financial recovery strategy for households (June 2020)



its innovative emergency arrangements for grants and interest-free loans onto a longer term footing. We also recommend that advice services in the Borough are scaled up with a focus on tackling food and fuel poverty as well as debt advice.

**Recommendation 27:** We recommend that the council clarifies its local welfare assistance scheme with a designated budget, topped up with government funding including from the new hardship fund; providing support in cash rather than in kind; and relaxing the qualifying criteria of the scheme to reach those most affected by coronavirus.

The Commission reviewed Brent Council's draft Financial Inclusion Action Plan 2019-2023, noting that it aims to help residents overcome high levels of debt and promote responsible borrowing. Credit unions are responsible lenders established to provide loans to those on lower incomes. However, the Commission felt the profile of credit unions in the Borough was low and little is known about them in the community.

**Recommendation 28:** We recommend that the council works with credit unions to provide low-cost loans to cut down dependence on loan sharks and other unscrupulous lenders.

Alongside signposting advice services and efforts to increase the provision of responsible lending, Commissioners noted that providing money management advice was essential to help people avoid getting into debt.

The Commission heard about the Community Money Mentor (CMM) programme run by Toynbee Hall (the anti-poverty charity). The CMM courses were being run across London, including in Brent, in partnership with Advice 4 Renters. The course is a comprehensive learning programme designed to develop learners' money-management skills and improve their financial health.

The course includes personal budgeting and living on a limited income, shopping and spending habits,

prioritising debts, reducing energy consumption and bills, price comparison and switching suppliers, and understanding the financial sector. It also raises awareness of the poverty premium (the poorest in society have to pay more for essential goods/services – such as energy prices are higher for pre-payment meters) and trains people to mentor others in money management.

**Recommendation 29:** We recommend that programmes such as the Community Money Mentors are rolled out across the Borough.

The Commission also noted the Mayor's commitment to promoting financial inclusion. In his manifesto in 2016, the Mayor stated that he would:

“Promote financial inclusion, through partnership with the financial sector, including social enterprises and credit unions with the goal of ensuring that every adult can access financial services in affordable ways that meet their needs, and that all young Londoners leave education with numeracy skills and an understanding of finance”<sup>50</sup>

Financial education is included in the National Curriculum since 2014. However, it was felt that the quality and coverage is patchy. Schools struggle with time and resources to teach it properly and it is often merged with other subjects thereby not getting the attention it needs. It was noted that advice services have traditionally struggled to gain access to schools to deliver much-needed advice services to parents. Where they have succeeded, the outcomes have been hugely beneficial to those parents, with significant financial gains.

Commissioners heard that more households were now approaching Citizens Advice Brent with Council Tax arrears, rent arrears and other household debts, such as fuel debts, rather than problems with credit cards and personal loans as used to be the case. According to research by the StepChange Debt Charity, a high proportion of their clients in Brent had energy bill arrears - clients living in Brent had the second highest proportion of clients in arrears with electricity and gas bills at 28.0% and 27.0% compared with London averages of 21.5% and 18.6% respectively.<sup>51</sup>

## DEBORAH'S STORY\*

Deborah is 62 and lives with her adult son and his girlfriend. She has lived in her current home, a housing association flat, for nine years and in Brent all her life. She is very happy where she lives now and with the housing association which has housed her since she was a child. However, she notes that her adult daughter had a very different experience which involved a long struggle to secure quality and affordable housing locally.

Deborah volunteers for a drug and alcohol charity but has been unemployed since 2010 due to suffering from bipolar disorder. She is a recovering alcoholic with a number of physical health conditions, including tendonitis in her shoulder and bursitis. Deborah currently receives Employment Support Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax relief. She says that financially “it's really, really tight” and she tries to economise wherever she can. However, she knows she is paying a premium in some areas such as the pre-payment meter for energy because paying higher unit charges is preferable than managing direct debits which could cause her to get overdrawn.

Being under coronavirus lockdown has increased their household expenses as the lights and TV are on more. As Deborah is fearful of contracting the virus she has been going to the more expensive local grocery shop rather than the bigger shop as she feels this is too busy.

She has several debts, including for the TV licence and some rent arrears. She says the debt recovery from the TV licence is “very unsympathetic”. On the other hand, she has noticed that her landlord is more amenable than it was previously regarding rent arrears.

“I'm not getting threatened by them. If I call them we come to an arrangement. It was not always this way.”

She similarly thinks that Council Tax debt recovery is better than it was previously. She says when she was previously in Council Tax arrears “immediately they [the council] tried to take me to court. I begged them to get the bailiffs off my back. They've become a lot more accommodating and helpful in the last 5 years or so”.

Her financial situation was even worse a few years ago as her son had a major gambling problem at the time and needed baling out which “caused incredible hardship”. At this point, as well as previously when her alcohol problem was at its worst, she was regularly using food banks.

Deborah received help previously from a local drug and alcohol centre who referred her to a national charity. She had a key worker who also provided financial assistance at the time for food bank vouchers and topping up her electricity key. She feels the help she received was “very generous” but one issue with the food bank support was that she could not carry everything they wanted to give her. She would be reluctant to ask for another foodbank voucher as she feels “there are others who are more in need”.

Deborah has identified and successfully applied for financial assistance including the Thames Water Customer Assistance Fund, but she feels that such schemes are not well publicised so many who could benefit are likely to be unaware of them.

“I'm pretty good at finding out about these things but a lot of people are ignorant to the fact that there are grants out there if you look... people are missing out. There is more help out there these days but not obviously.”

She fears that the household's financial situation may get to crisis point again for example if her son or his girlfriend become unemployed as a result of coronavirus.

“[A crisis point] is always a close possibility, we have an uncertain future.”

\*names have been changed

50 Sadiq Khan, Manifesto for Mayor 2016

51 StepChange, London in the Red: Brent debt statistics (2017)





Many families struggling with debts are unable to pay their Council Tax arrears. The Commission's view was that this was only likely to increase in light of the Covid-19 outbreak. This makes it even more important that the council considers carefully the approach to recovering outstanding Council Tax; the Commission was encouraged to hear the council's approach. Similarly, the council along with other social housing providers, should consider the treatment of outstanding rent payments and the best approaches to agreeing repayment plans.

**Recommendation 30: Although the Commission noted the review of the Council Tax Support scheme 18 months ago, we are concerned a) at the possibility of the arrangements leading to increased arrears as a result of Covid-19 and recommend special consideration be given to improving the treatment of non-dependants; and b) that the council reviews its approach to the outsourced enforcement service for Council Tax debts, and carefully monitors its use of enforcement agents, as well as issuing sanctions if agents do not operate fairly.**

**Recommendation 31: We recommend that the council should also consider whether court orders/ liability orders are necessary in all cases of Council Tax arrears and, wherever possible, should exercise greater flexibility regarding payment plans and offers of repayment wherever possible, while discontinuing the practice of requiring immediate payment of a year's Council Tax immediately when arrears are encountered.**

### WELFARE SUPPORT

The large numbers of Brent residents with low incomes means that the role of welfare is incredibly important to reduce poverty and alleviate severe financial hardship. Most of this support comes from central government but the council also provides financial assistance and supports local advice services which help residents claim the benefits they are entitled to. Those we spoke valued these services, but more could be done to raise awareness of the support available. Demand for welfare has increased significantly in the wake of the pandemic, this is true of state benefits, council welfare support and local welfare advice services.

The council has introduced a hub model to deliver support and advice to residents across the Borough: The Commission greatly welcomed this excellent initiative. We noted that four hubs are open to date and the fifth will follow in due course. Commissioners welcomed this tailored approach and recognised the model as one which could be extended further.

**Recommendation 32: We recommend that the council explores a further extension of the Hub model so that advice services are available at venues such as GP surgeries and family wellbeing centres, in order for people to have their issues addressed in that they already visit and trust.**

**Recommendation 33: We commend the work being undertaken by Brent to work with its health partners in mitigating the impact of the current pandemic and recommend continuing partnership in tailoring localised health support to those areas most impacted.**

The data show that a higher proportion of Brent residents receive means-tested benefits than nationally. Even so, some residents the Commission heard from are not claiming benefits they are entitled to, causing real hardship. The need for welfare support and advice was apparent for those without family, friends and wider social networks to help. Nevertheless, for others that we heard from (which is also evident in the data), even when they have accessed government support it was simply not enough. We also heard from a number of residents with a disability or long-term health condition which limited their ability to work but nonetheless were not able to qualify for disability benefits meaning they were in extreme financial hardship.

In 2013, the then Office of Public Management found that for every £1 invested in Macmillan's welfare rights service there was over £20 return in benefit claims, compensation and financial reward. Child Poverty Action Group's (CPAG) advice workers in Tower Hamlets delivered £11,000 in entitlements for families for every hour of benefits advice provided and over 12 months recovered over £1m.<sup>52</sup>

With one in three households in poverty – and four in ten children – many of Brent's residents are suffering an incomes crisis. The provision of adequate welfare support is essential to poverty reduction. However, it is only effective if people are able to access that the support. Good welfare advice is therefore critical to supporting Brent residents out of poverty. For some residents the main issue is not a lack of awareness of advice and support, but the lack of it. The Commission was specifically concerned about the lack of legal advice which was highlighted - in particular a lack of local legal advice services for benefit appeals to tribunals.

<sup>52</sup> CPAG, Child poverty in Brent: A briefing for London's councillors (2018)



## AHMED'S STORY\*

57-year-old Ahmed was born in Ethiopia and came to the UK 28 years ago having previously been imprisoned in his home country and then in a refugee camp in Kenya. He has been living alone in his council bedsit flat for the past 12 years. He likes his local area due to its extensive facilities and feels that the safety has improved in the time he has been living there.

“The park is like my church and there are supermarkets nearby and buses to anywhere.”

“The crime rate is better than it was when I moved here 12 years ago. I feel like I'm in a safe place and no one's threatened.”

Ahmed is unemployed and receives UC but gets less than the maximum amount as he initially took out an advance payment loan which is now being repaid. In addition, his UC payments are being discounted to repay previous rent arrears. As such, he struggles to make ends meet and shows signs of material deprivation. For example, he cannot afford a computer or broadband, relying instead on his pay as you go phone and free Wi-Fi hotspots for digital connectivity. He also has past experience of being homeless due to unpaid rent although this was several years ago.

Ahmed would like to be working in order to improve his financial situation and also to feel he is contributing to society. He has had various short-term jobs and also has done some voluntary work since he has lived in the UK. He also received some funding to study and attained a maths/statistics degree in 2006. However, he has never had a long-term full-time job as he says: “I never had the opportunity.” He was also physically unable to work for two years due to a serious gall bladder illness.

Since recovering from this illness his most recent job was as a concierge at a block of flats, but this was a temporary position which ended last August. Since then and until lockdown he has applied for many roles but hasn't been successful and says that feedback from employers is that there is a high level of competition for jobs currently. He doesn't feel Jobcentre Plus offers much in the way of proactive job coaching and mainly provides information and signposting rather than advice.

Ahmed has been recently helped by a local advice service regarding his rent arrears, a situation which arose when his request for his rent to be automatically paid out of his UC benefit was not actioned due to an administrative error. The representative of this advice service contacted the council on his behalf and arranged an affordable repayment plan. In addition, they gave him food bank vouchers, emergency credit for his electricity meter, a referral to a charity to get clothes, and information on other financial assistance he could apply for, like Warm Home Discount. He says:

“I am very grateful to them. I didn't know what I would do and I was worried that I would be homeless again.”

\*names have been changed

DWP benefit claim data show that Housing Benefit claims are considerably higher in Brent compared with both London and the rest of the country. As of August 2019, 30,781 households in Brent were receiving Housing Benefit, which is 29% of all households in Brent (substantially higher than the London average of 18% and the UK average of 13%).<sup>53</sup>

Some 45% of people claiming Housing Benefit in Brent are in the PRS.<sup>54</sup> Prior to the lockdown, the data suggest that around half of households in the PRS in Brent are claiming Housing Benefit.<sup>55</sup> As Housing Benefit is a reasonably reliable proxy for poverty, such data suggest a significant number of people in poverty in Brent are in the PRS<sup>56</sup>

53 Source: DWP, Stat-Xplore (data for August 2019) and GLA, household data. Note that the percentages are calculated as a proportion of households rather than benefit units.

54 DWP Stat-Xplore, data for November 2019

55 DWP Stat-Xplore and GLA, Housing tenure of households based on Annual Population Survey data – data for 2018

56 MHCLG, English Housing Survey 2018 to 2019 (2020)

Around 13,000 households in Brent are on UC.<sup>57</sup> The housing element of UC only covers the cost of the cheapest third of rents in London, which means that it doesn't cover the rent for 70% of renters, who will have a shortfall to make up if they have to rely on UC to meet their rent. Universal Credit applications in Brent reached a record high of 18,775 during the lockdown period. They are up four fold compared to pre-lockdown - 2nd highest in London. Brent Central is ranked 5th and Brent North 6th among London constituencies for those who have been furloughed. As part of the Covid-19 Support Fund the council is proposing to make two streams of monies available – grants and an interest-free loan (working with a credit union to administer the loan).

Problems with UC have been widely reported. They include: difficulties making a claim; reported earnings; waiting for the first payment; missing elements; disappearing premiums for people with long-term health conditions; inadequate Local Housing Allowance rates within UC; alternative payment arrangements; deductions for rent arrears; sanctions and work-related requirements.

According to London Councils' evidence to the Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee's examination of Universal Credit,<sup>58</sup> the London experience of UC has been that it places both claimants and local authorities in a position of financial insecurity. This largely arises from the five-week wait and a failure to recognise claimant vulnerability and adapt accordingly. Boroughs report that the majority of UC claimants begin their claim already in a position of financial insecurity. New UC customers are either transferring from a legacy benefit, in insecure and low-income employment or recently unemployed – in all these case customers are likely to have no savings and are often already in debt. The policy design of UC, in particular the built in five-week waiting period, serves to deepen this financial insecurity, which can be made even worse if the first payment is delayed. These claimants can then require emergency assistance with food and other expenses.

The benefit cap has a significant impact in London

because of the capital's high rents, which lead to large Housing Benefit claims. The large number of London households capped (and the larger reductions they experience) is forcing families into hardship and adding to the pressures on local authorities' homelessness and housing options services. In London, as in the rest of the country, single parents make up the overwhelming majority of claimants affected by the benefit cap. The Brent Central parliamentary constituency has the highest number of households affected by the benefit cap in London: 657 households in total are capped; 246 single parent households are capped (the second highest in London, below Edmonton) and 92 households containing couples with children are capped (the highest in London).<sup>59</sup>

Alongside this is the two-child limit which was part of a package of changes to benefits announced in 2015, aimed at reducing spending on working-age families. From 6 April 2017, low-income families having a third or subsequent child lost their entitlement to additional support through child tax credit and universal credit, worth £2,780 per child per year. According to CPAG's research with the Church of England, Brent Central is in the top 100 parliamentary constituencies affected by the two-child limit, with 34.6% of all children affected (Brent Central ranks 37th out of the top 100 constituencies). Furthermore, it is estimated that by April 2024, 2700 families in Brent Central will be affected by the policy, or 75% of all working families, including 9900 children, which is 27% of all children in the constituency.<sup>60</sup>

The Commission heard that informal support from friends and family plays an important role for many Brent residents when they are facing these challenges. However, for those without wide social networks or those trying to navigate complicated systems across multiple agencies specialist advice is critical and was valued greatly by Brent residents.

57 Source: DWP, Stat-Xplore (data for February 2020)

58 17 April 2020

59 Source: DWP, Stat-Xplore (data for August 2019)

60 <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/No-one-knows-what-the-future-can-hold-FINAL.pdf>



“I was by myself and no one was helping me. When I found them I was so happy.” (Brent resident)

“Someone was supporting and guiding me and, most importantly, listening to what I was saying.” (Brent resident)

“They helped me set out a clear vision for the future, I had a pathway of what to do.” (Brent resident)

“They’ve been a lifeline.” (Brent resident)

This support covers a range of issues and the Commission heard from residents who benefited from local services providing:

- Help to challenge eviction orders or secure emergency accommodation
- Support to improve their housing more generally
- Food bank vouchers and emergency credit for pre-paid energy meters
- Advice on benefits and support with making a Universal Credit application
- Assistance with looking for jobs
- Associated support such as with understanding official written communications
- Drug and alcohol services which supported a couple of residents with addiction issues
- Debt and insolvency advice
- Education, training and work support

Both what the Commission was told by those it spoke to and the experience of Commissioners delivering services locally suggested that service users particularly value: holistic support or appropriate referrals to other agencies, so that all of the priority issues of individuals can be dealt with; mentoring service users where appropriate to build their confidence and enable them to self-help; or alternatively, advocacy on their behalf where the service user is vulnerable or otherwise unable to self-help. The Commission also heard from local advice services who echoed that this approach to listening, supporting and empowering people rather than ‘doing to’ was most effective.

**Overview Recommendation E: We recommend that the council ensures welfare support reaches everyone who needs it by making “every contact count” and referring people to, and supporting the finances of, the charities and community organisations that provide much-needed, expert advice.**

While support services play a vital role, a number of residents we spoke to had not accessed any local services despite having obvious support needs. This was primarily due to a lack of awareness. Good signposting, referral systems and/or outreach services are therefore critically important to build awareness and drive those who need help to the appropriate services.

“I am not aware of any support. I wish I did as I’d take it up because I need to do something. These things may be out there but people aren’t aware of it. They’re a well-kept secret.” (Brent resident)

“There are a lot of things that you lack information on. You don’t know what he could be entitled to, what he could be getting. It

leaves you deflated. Life’s hard enough already without having to deal with all this yourself.” (Brent resident)

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, many families with children are now facing severe financial hardship and need emergency financial support to pay utility bills and buy food, particularly when alternative forms of support such as Council Tax Relief or free school meal vouchers are not available to them, either because they are working or because their incomes are too high. Data published by the Standard Life Foundation show that 42% of families with children, and lone parents in particular, are in serious financial difficulty or are struggling to make ends meet, compared with 24% of other households.<sup>61</sup> Meanwhile the Trussell Trust recently reported that its networks experienced a 122% increase in food parcels provided to children, compared to the same period last year.<sup>62</sup>

The Child Poverty Action Group’s (CPAG) Early Warning System has found that families are struggling with the additional costs of raising children, made worse by children being at home due to school closures. Some parents are experiencing a sudden loss of income due to job losses or not being able to work as a result of childcare responsibilities.<sup>63</sup>

CPAG’s Cost of the School Day project surveyed children, young people, parents and carers on their experiences during lockdown and consequent school closures, finding that over half of parents and carers reported being moderately to extremely concerned about money.<sup>64</sup>

Even when Brent residents are working, wages are often simply not enough to pay the bills and feed the family. The need for support is evident in the use of food banks, with the number of people accessing support rising rapidly during lockdown. High numbers of Brent residents are also in fuel poverty and struggle

to heat their home. Housing costs present Brent residents with a particular challenge.

Households with children are also at a higher of risk of being in poverty. Those we heard from spoke of the emotional distress of not being able to afford basic items for their children and the sacrifices that parents made. Such evidence highlights the importance of having an adequate welfare system to reduce poverty in the current downturn, but also longer term. The Commission felt that tackling the incomes crisis in Brent ultimately required central government action.

“We can’t go on holidays as it’s expensive for both of us. My son hasn’t been away since he was five or six. His grandad pays for him to play football, but he’d also like to do boxing and karate.” (Brent resident)

**Recommendation 34: To help bring together the many strands of council activity concerned with child poverty, we recommend that the council considers an overarching strategic objective to address child poverty with measurable outcomes that are regularly monitored, perhaps with a reporting line to Full Council.**

Welfare support for Brent residents does not only come from DWP benefits. The council also plays an important role through a variety of local welfare support schemes. For example, Brent’s Local Welfare Assistance scheme helps residents in crisis.

Commissioners received evidence from council officers on the current approach to welfare taken by the council. In relation to debt it focuses on a

61 CPAG calculations using data provided in: Kempson, E. and Poppe, C. (2020) Coronavirus Financial Impact Tracker: key findings from a national survey, Standard Life Foundation

62 Food parcels provided to children during the last two weeks of March 2020, compared to the same period in 2019. Food banks see record spike in need as coalition of anti-poverty charities call for strong lifeline to be thrown to anyone who needs it, Trussell Trust

63 CPAG, Mind the Gaps: Reporting on families incomes during the pandemic

64 CPAG, The Cost of Learning in Lockdown: Family experiences of school closures, June 2020



supportive approach to all debtors, aiming to provide a clear ethical approach to collection. This includes offering routes to support through Council Tax Support (CTS), UC, Housing Benefit and offering deferred payment arrangements. At the time enforcement action had been suspended due to the pandemic. Council Tax owed to the council for years before 2020/2021 is approximately £40 million without costs. Collection at the end of May was £31.2 million 19.4% compared to 22.6% for May 2019. During the pandemic a £150 hardship payment was made to working age recipients of CTS and deferred payments allowed for those affected by the pandemic.

The Commission noted that the council had introduced a new Council Tax Support scheme. Brent's banded system aims to ensure those on lower incomes receive more support to pay their Council Tax and the council has had to fund the changes to its reformed scheme. It has replaced its former 20 per cent minimum payment with 100 per cent support for those on the lowest incomes in Band 1, as well as disabled claimants who were already eligible for 100 per cent support. It has also reduced the level of support available to those in the other bands and non-dependents. This is essentially a redistribution of subsidy away from Brent's working poor households to its poorest residents. For example, a single person/couple earning circa £250 per week

would be expected to pay full Council Tax. This equates to a salary of approx. £12,000 per year, which would be £6000 each for a couple – well below the national average and well below the London Living Wage.

The Commission welcomes the council's approach to supporting lower income residents meet their Council Tax bills. The Commission did, however, think that this should not be the final word on the scheme and it should be monitored as it settles in to see if it could be improved. Commissioners also highlighted that consideration needed to be given to how non-dependants are treated within the scheme.

**GLA RECOMMENDATION: The Commission recommends that the GLA work with London local authorities to strengthen the local social security net. This could include encouraging boroughs to improve their Council Tax support and local welfare assistance schemes and highlighting and incentivising good practice in these areas.**

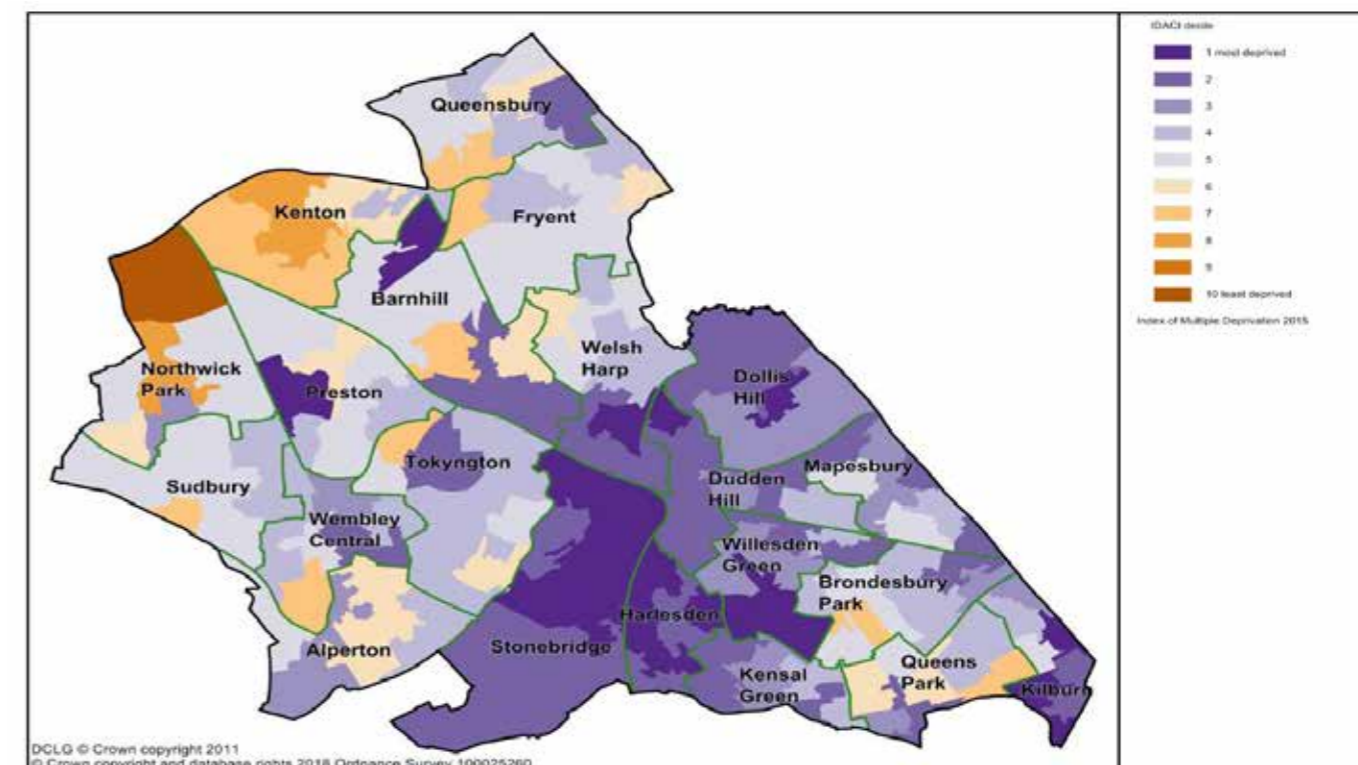
### CHILD POVERTY

Children can face educational barriers and be stigmatised because of their low incomes. This includes the ability of parents to afford school uniforms. These issues can be exacerbated by insecure housing tenancies leading to children moving schools multiple times, requiring new uniforms each time. The Commission heard of examples of children not being able to go on school trips because family finances were too tight. Evidence from the impact of the Cost of the School Day project in Scotland, and work in the North East highlight what can be done to poverty-proof the school day and remove and reduce financial barriers to education. These programmes have helped improve understanding of poverty amongst the schools, shape policies which are more poverty sensitive, reduce the cost barriers to participation in school (and after school activities), raise awareness of entitlements and reduce financial pressure on family finances.

Brent is a young borough. Creating a dynamic and prosperous borough fit for the future will require making the most of young Brent residents' talents. However, child poverty is high within the borough.

According to the End Child Poverty Coalition, in 2017-2018, Brent was joint 6th among London local authorities in terms of child poverty and had the 14th highest poverty rate across the country. Some 22% of Brent's children live in poverty before housing costs and 43% of Brent's children live in poverty after housing costs (AHC). Dollis Hill ward has the highest rate of child poverty AHC at 51%, while Northwick Park ward in Brent has the lowest rate of child poverty AHC at 32%.<sup>65</sup> According to the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019, Brent is the 11th most deprived (average rank of ranks) of the 32 London boroughs (and 49th of 317 local authorities) and 10th for average rank of scores (79th nationally) in terms of income deprivation affecting children.<sup>66</sup>

Income deprivation affecting children index (IDACI) 2015, Brent



Source: IDACI 2015, Department for Communities and Local Government



65 <http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/poverty-in-your-area-2019/>

66 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019>





Commissioners heard of the great work that is being undertaken in schools and with the voluntary sector in tackling child poverty. However, it did note that the council does not have a tackling child poverty strategy in place to set a strategic direction for this work.

The national Troubled Families Programme (TFP) was highlighted by officers as an example of effective partnership working to support families. The programme focuses on a number of key areas, including: reducing worklessness within families, improving levels of school attendance, reducing crime and anti-social behaviour and improving mental and physical health. Real success has been achieved as a result with phase one of the TFP (2012-15) gaining positive outcomes for 810 vulnerable Brent families and in particular increased education, training and employment positive outcomes.

To help those facing hardship, the council offers accessible routes to applying for free school meals

within the Borough. Applications can be submitted to the local authority via an online form or paper application, and these are assessed using the Department for Education's Eligibility Checking Service (ECS). Where eligibility cannot be immediately determined using the ECS, parents are invited to submit evidence to prove eligibility and this is checked manually. Once eligibility is determined, schools are immediately updated through the council's online School Access Module. The council regularly sends communications and publicity to schools which encourage parents to apply for free school meals for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of each school which will receive additional pupil premium funding for every eligible pupil.

In October 2019 the council agreed the creation of eight Family Wellbeing Centres that will provide an integrated 'whole family' service (for children aged 0-18 years old and for those up to 25 with additional needs), bringing together core health visiting, school nursing,

children's centre services and some parenting and family support services into a single offer.

Supporting young people beyond schools will be incredibly important to tackling poverty and social exclusion. The provision of community youth services will be needed more than ever as the consequences of the pandemic takes their toll on family resources, and as younger people leave the education system into an unfavourable jobs market.

Commissioners noted that youth outreach has an important role to play. It happens in young people's own environment and complements new and existing youth work. The work is primarily used to inform young people of services that exist in their locality and to encourage them to use such services. Outreach can also seek to identify, through consultation with young people, any gaps that exist in services aimed at meeting their needs.

The importance and value of listening to young people is clear from recent outreach work into how the lockdown has affected young residents. The Young Brent Foundation<sup>67</sup> undertook a pilot scheme across three key wards in partnership with community groups, speaking to 600 young people. Of these, 43% reported that their key need during the lockdown was food drop-offs or food vouchers. Six in ten stated that the main reason for being out was boredom and that minimal social distancing was taking place. Three quarters talked about overcrowding, family disputes or the home was noisy. Six in ten were worried about mental health issues. Eight in ten did however state that anti-social behaviour and gang-related activity had decreased. Such evidence shows the value of listening to young people and the need for young people to have access to activities in the lockdown and beyond which can help strengthen community cohesion. This is outlined in the case study that follows.

### CASE STUDY – YOUNG BRENT FOUNDATION

Young Brent Foundation (YBF) has been working closely with Brent Council to support out of school settings (OOSS) organisations with capacity building, governance and management. The majority of children who participate in some form of organised activity outside of school are from some of our most vulnerable groups.

In January YBF launched its OOSS Fund to support these organisations over a 3-year period. This opportunity not only builds capacity but addresses the issue of economic inequality by narrowing the education gap for children and young people in Brent. Children and young people in Brent are given access to quality education outside of the formal school environment and an opportunity to reach their full potential.

The OOSS Fund goes further than just offering a funding opportunity. It offers potential applicants with bid writing training followed by one-to-one sessions for individuals to discuss their projects further with a professional fundraiser.

This has resulted in 15 OOSS organisations making strong applications to YBF. This saw the development of partnerships which contributed to YBF's intercultural dialogue agenda. YBF were able to support groups with common agendas and interests, facilitate the sharing of resources and network young people groups. YBF was also able to widen its OOSS reach for children and young people with the successful applications from a South American and an Eastern European school in Brent.

**Recommendation 35: We recommend that the council brings together a statutory-led "Youth and Community Strategy for Young People" in Brent and develops an outreach model with the voluntary and community sector to engage with young people in addressing the impacts of poverty and social exclusion.**

### HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Throughout our report reference has been made to the interrelationship between poverty and health. Of course the Covid pandemic has brought to the surface the health inequalities faced by so many Brent citizens. The council has sought to respond where it can. And there

<sup>67</sup> Charitable Independent voluntary sector body and umbrella organisation for the benefit of all youth providers in Brent.



is recognition of the obstacles for poorer households in accessing health facilities in the Borough.

One aspect of the drive to improve health is the growing interest in “social prescribing”. We commend this approach which encourages GPs

**FUEL POVERTY**

Low income and poor housing standards can lead to residents finding it hard to heat their home. Fuel poverty is defined as arising where a household whose fuel costs are above average, but their disposable income (after housing and fuel costs) is below the poverty line. Data show 17,000 households in Brent are in fuel poverty – 15% of all households in the Borough. This compares with 12% in London as a whole. As such, Brent has the second highest rate of fuel poverty of any London borough (and 14th highest of 326 local authorities across England).<sup>68</sup>

Many of the residents the Commission spoke to struggled to pay for their energy supply and could be considered to be fuel poor. For example, it was common practice amongst some to cut back energy usage to the bare minimum to reduce costs. There were also some prepayment meter users who told us

to improve health outcomes through a range of measures from addressing obesity through exercise to easing mental health problems by referring patients to financial advice services.

that they self-disconnect (i.e. do without an energy supply altogether) when they do not have enough money to top up.

“Gas always suffers and my daughter is always complaining that it’s freezing.” (Brent resident)

“If it’s not really needed heating won’t be on and the same with lights – that’s 24/7.” (Brent resident)

Proportion of households in fuel poverty by borough



Source: DBEIS, Sub-regional Fuel Poverty England, 2017 (2019)

68 Source: DBEIS, Sub-regional Fuel Poverty England, 2017 (2019)

The Commission’s view was that fuel poverty is a symptom of inadequate income and overly focusing on fuel poverty risked ignoring the underlying cause. Nevertheless, tackling specific causes of fuel poverty could help people suffering because they are unable to afford to heat their homes. Those residents we heard from were largely unaware of initiatives such as the Warm Home Discount or of the possibility to ask for emergency credit for pre-payment meters from energy suppliers or local charities.

“A lot of people are ignorant to the fact that there are grants out there if you look. People are missing out. I think there is more help out there these days but it’s not obvious.” (Brent resident)

**Recommendation 36: We recommend that the council, as a priority, works with partners to tackle fuel poverty in the Borough, alerting private landlords letting the most energy inefficient homes to the requirement to improve energy standards, using enforcement powers and taking advantage of government vouchers toward the cost, thereby reducing excess winter deaths following Covid-19 and other respiratory illnesses.**

**GLA RECOMMENDATION: The Commission recommends that the GLA works with the community and voluntary sector and the council to on a publicity campaign to raise awareness of grants and support for energy bills and energy saving measures.**

Another aspect of reducing the energy costs residents face is improving the energy efficiency of the housing stock in the borough. Alongside other housing providers, the council should continue to examine ways of improving the energy efficiency ratings of their homes which are also required to meet the country’s climate change objectives.

69 Brent Food Aid Network, A Post-Pandemic Roadmap for Food Security, April 2020

Since 2018 private landlords have had to meet Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards. These standards should help raise standards within the PRS and help save poorer residents on their energy standards. If standards are to be raised they will need to be enforced.

Commissioners noted that tackling fuel poverty cannot be the responsibility of one organisation – it needs to be tackled by collaboration between the council, NHS, the voluntary and private sectors. This includes a clear referral process and a co-ordinated fuel debt advice service for those who are in fuel poverty so that they can get the support they need.

**FOOD POVERTY**

Food Poverty is the inability to afford, or to have access to, food to make up a healthy diet. Commissioners heard about the services provided by food banks in the borough including during the pandemic. A number of residents the Commission spoke to had accessed help from local food banks. Those we spoke to reported receiving vouchers from local charities or their GP in order to do so.

During the pandemic, the council’s Bridge Park Food Hub distributed approximately 800 food parcels a day on a 4-week commitment cycle to residents who contacted the council in urgent need of food. Other food aid organisations – both new and established - have also experienced a significant increase in demand across the Borough. Some of this additional demand is currently being supplied by pop-up hot food suppliers who may not be actively involved in the Brent Food Aid Network. They are often serving thousands of meals a week but some of this demand is located outside of Brent.<sup>69</sup>

The Commission heard from Sufra NW London food bank and kitchen, who described the increased demand for services. Over the initial three months of the coronavirus pandemic demand for food aid had increased by 200% and they had delivered over 11,000 foodbank parcels and over 11,000 fresh meals had been prepared and delivered. Alongside food aid, food banks have been providing welfare advice to those in crisis.

The Trussell Trust is able to produce data using their



network, but this does not include other food banks so there is no official method of collecting, collating and reporting data of overall food bank usage in Brent. Between January 2017 and August 2017 the Brent Food Bank redeemed a total of 1,403 vouchers, this was up from 1,043 over the same period in 2016, an increase of 34.5%. The greatest number of guests come from Harlesden, Stonebridge and Willesden Green. The largest numbers of guest referrals fulfilled were referred by Brent Community Law Centre, Brent Citizen Advice and the Willesden Probation Trust. There were 13 referrals which came from the Wembley Job Centre Plus.<sup>70</sup>

The food bank users the Commission heard from were all very grateful for this support but there were also some limitations mentioned which included:

- Delays in receiving food package deliveries since the coronavirus lockdown
- Difficulty for some in carrying the items if they picked them up themselves
- Issues with storing the items for those with small fridges and limited storage space (e.g. those living in studio flats or bedsits)
- Having limited options available to them if they have specific diets (e.g. gluten free, Halal etc.)

In addition, some of those who would benefit from using food banks were unaware of how to access them or were reluctant to use them as they felt that such support should be reserved for “others who are more in need”.

The Commission heard about the initiatives which support growing local produce, including the two community garden schemes located in Brent (Harlesden community gardens and the Sufra/St. Raphael's community garden). It was noted that these could help provide food for local residents and have an educational role in promoting healthier eating.

There is a clear need for food banks in the Borough and Commissioners highlighted the need to ensure that the work of the food banks is clearly linked to advice services and health and well-being services in Brent moving forward.

Covid-19 has led to numerous examples of voluntary and community activity, through charities, faith groups and informal local initiatives. The Commission sees an opportunity for extending these mutual and self-help activities, for example working with food banks that provide communal cooking and eating, or with credit unions that prevent families engaging with loan sharks, or developing innovative shared transport services. Commissioners highlighted the opportunity for the council to look for partners, like Nesta, Trust for London, the Centre for London and others to explore innovative programmes that could help reduce poverty in Brent at the very local level.

**Recommendation 37:** We recommend that the council supports the future sustainability of food aid agencies in the Borough including by further developing community garden schemes and working with food banks, mutual aid groups and residents' associations.

## Going forward

Finally, as noted in the Chair's Overview, the Commission felt there should be an overarching and unifying recommendation which could ensure ongoing value from Brent's initiative in creating a Poverty Commission and could enable the council to sustain momentum for poverty reduction:

**Overview Recommendation F:** We recommend that Brent Council establishes a Consultative Group that brings together members and officers with community organisations, service users and relevant bodies covering housing, health and education and works collaboratively a) to agree measurable targets, reflecting the Commission's conclusions, for reducing poverty over the years ahead; b) to explore and initiate collaborative working to deliver holistic, person-centred services which empower residents and increase resilience; and c) to monitor progress, reporting back to the council on a periodic basis.

<sup>70</sup> <http://democracy.brent.gov.uk/documents/s63015/Appendix%201%20-%20Food%20Banks%20Task%20Group%20Report%20-%20Final.pdf>





## Appendices

### Terms of Reference

#### PURPOSE OF THE COMMISSION

The Commission will recommend practical, evidence-based measures to tackle poverty in Brent, identifying and addressing its causes and mitigating its consequences. It will particularly focus on ways of building resident's capacity and capability so that they can enjoy the quality of life and opportunities all Brent's people should be able to expect throughout their lives. This is a priority for us, as we know many people are managing the effects of poverty in their daily lives.

#### THE COMMISSION WILL:

- Develop a comprehensive evidence base about poverty and its causes in Brent, building on that already supporting the Stronger Communities and Tackling Financial Exclusion Strategies.
- Identify key actions and initiatives that can be taken by the council and its partners in the public, voluntary and private sectors to make measurable progress in tackling poverty, its causes and consequences.
- Identify best practice from Brent, London and elsewhere in addressing the Commission's objectives and consider how these can be rolled out and scaled up to ensure their effectiveness.

#### TO DO THIS, THE COMMISSION WILL:

- Bring together Members, experts in the issues under consideration, and those with practical experience of the issues and other stakeholders across sectors and disciplines to receive evidence and recommend actions to tackle poverty in Brent.
- Produce a final report to Cabinet with practical evidence based recommendations for the council and its partners to implement.

#### THE COMMISSION WILL FOCUS ON THE FOLLOWING FOUR AREAS:

- Housing
- Economy and Jobs
- Tackling Financial Exclusion and Local Welfare (including Child Poverty, Fuel and Food Poverty)

#### MEMBERSHIP AND STATUS

The Commission will be independently chaired and will comprise of:

- 3 councillors (non-executive)
- Commissioners who are experts in their field

The Commission will act in an advisory capacity to Brent Council. The Commission will have no decision-making or budgetary powers. The Commission was set up at the request of Cllr Southwood and will report back to her.

#### CHAIR AND MEMBER ROLES

The Chair will work closely with the other members of the Commission to shape the Commission's work and outputs, and will actively seek input from all members. The Commission will look at the national, regional and local perspective.

Members will work with the Chair to provide strategic direction, drawing on their knowledge, expertise and connections to support the Commission's work. The Commission will report back in September 2020.

The membership of the Commission will consist of 16 Commissioners.

With the Expert Witnesses attending for specific discussion topics, including:

- Carolyn Downs – Chief Executive
- Cllr Muhammed Butt – Leader and London Council's Executive Member for Welfare
- Cllr Margaret McLennan – Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance and Resources
- Cllr Eleanor Southwood – Lead Member for Housing and Welfare Reform
- Cllr Tom Miller – Lead Member for Community Safety and Engagement
- Cllr Shama Tatler – Lead Member for Regeneration, Property and Planning
- Cllr Mili Patel - Lead Member for Children's

Safeguarding, Early Help and Social Care

- Cllr Matt Kelcher – Chair of the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee
- Cllr Ketan Sheth – Chair of the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee
- Amar Dave – Strategic Director Regeneration and Environment
- Gail Tolley – Strategic Director Children and Young People
- Phil Porter – Strategic Director Community Wellbeing
- Peter Gadsdon – Strategic Director Digital and Customer Services (includes CT and HB)
- Hakeem Osinaike – Operational Director Housing
- Matt Dibben – Brent Council – Head of Employment, Skills and Enterprise
- Chris Whyte – Operational Director Environment Services

- Alice Lester – Operational Director Regeneration, Growth and Employment
- Nick Ljustina – Operational Director Property and Assets
- Dr Melanie Smith – Director of Public Health (includes culture)
- Colin Wilderspin – Head of Community Safety
- Jon Abrams - Inclusion London
- Mike Hawking- Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Users of Services
- Debbie Weekes-Bernard, Deputy Mayor for Social Integration GLA
- Duncan Ambrose – NHS Brent - CCG
- Kirit Wadia - Brent Multi Faith Forum Vice-Chair
- Rajesh Makwana - Sufra

### What the Commission covered

The Commission covered the inter-connecting themes of:

- Housing
- Economy and Jobs
- Tackling Financial Exclusion and Local Welfare

The Commission found that these issues frequently inter-related and that those in poverty often face challenges across these areas. This was reflected in the fact that many of the witnesses the Commission heard from worked across more than one of these areas.

### What the Commission did

- Held nine Commission meetings to hear evidence on the themes and follow-up discussions.
- Heard from experts in the field.
- Heard from councillors and council officers leading work on each of the themes.
- Spoke to local people to gain a view on the "lived experience" of poverty – allowing it to gain powerful insights.
- Spoke with local MPs.
- Considered the national and regional contexts to local issues and challenges.

- Considered a range of data relevant to the areas it examined.
- Considered best practice that has successfully been taken forward in Brent and elsewhere that may be replicated, scaled up or adapted for wider use.
- Delivered a councillors engagement session for all councillors.
- Attended Brent's Disability Forum.
- Held recommendations meetings with all Commissioners to formulate and agree recommendations.



## The Commissioners

- Independent Chair – Lord Best
- Cllr Sandra Kabir – Brent Councillor (Queensbury Ward)
- Cllr Elliot Chappell – Brent Councillor (Willesden Green)
- Cllr Suresh Kansagra – Brent Councillor (Kenton Ward)
- Atara Fridler – Crisis Skilight Brent
- Alice Woudhuysen - Child Poverty Action Group
- Ben Rogers – Centre for London
- Greg Beales - Shelter
- Jacqueline Carr – Citizens' Advice Bureau
- Jacky Peacock – Advice4Renters
- Chris Murray – Young Brent Foundation
- Faisa Osman/Theresa McGrady – Step Up Hub
- Paul Hunter - The Smith Institute
- Daphne Giachero – London Citizens
- Sam Ashton - London Councils
- Claudia Wallace - Trussell Trust



