

**London Borough of Brent**  
**Report of the Budget Scrutiny Panel 2018/19**

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# **1. Introduction**

## **Scrutiny process**

Brent's constitution gives a clear and important role to overview and scrutiny in its budget setting process. We take this responsibility very seriously and hope to act as a critical friend and second pair of eyes when it comes to examining the cabinet's budget proposals. This report summarises our investigations, conclusions and recommendations with regards to the proposed two-year budget for 2019/20 and 2020/21. It is intended to begin a constructive debate about the specific proposals in the budget and also the wider way in which Brent sets a budget and its priorities. It will be presented to for adoption to the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee and then to the Cabinet and Full Council and so we hope it will allow all councillors to have their say about these important issues.

As the budget cuts across all departments in the council, our Panel was comprised of members of all three Brent scrutiny committees. Each of the committee chairs was represented on the Panel, alongside backbench committee members and representatives from the opposition group. As chair of the scrutiny committee which has responsibility for council resources, Matt Kelcher had overall responsibility to chair the Panel.

Thank you for to all of the members for giving up their time to take part in this process, and also to the many council officers who worked very hard to provide us with all of the information and support we needed.



**Councillor Afzal**



**Councillor Colwill**



**Councillor Johnson**



**Councillor Long**



**Councillor Kelcher, Budget Panel Chair**



**Councillor Kansagra**



**Councillor Nerva**



**Councillor Sheth**



**Councillor Stephens**

The panel held a series of evening meetings between September and December 2018 to prepare this report. This included private meetings where we discussed our own findings and ideas, and evidence sessions where we questioned lead members and relevant officers about the proposals they are responsible for bringing forward.

## **Two-year budget**

For the past few cycles Brent has set two-year budgets, the second year being formally adopted (with any necessary changes) at the Council's budget setting meeting prior to that financial year as is required by law. Overall, we endorse this approach as it allows for longer term planning and gives the organisation as a whole some breathing space to consider big issues and trends outside of annual budgetary pressure.

This policy also influences the format of budget scrutiny. At the start of a two-year cycle there are many new budget proposals to consider – around 70 on this occasion – which take up a huge amount of the Panel's time. In the middle of a two-year cycle there are far fewer new policies to consider, and so we have more time to examine larger strategic issues. For example, last year, we took the time to analyse the impact of business rates devolution to the London pilot pool on local government finances as a whole.

For reasons outlined already, there is insufficient time and resources for such broad stroke work at this point in the cycle, and so this report will focus much more heavily on specific plans in the draft budget.

Next year we intend to again take a more strategic approach.

## Legal statement

Local authorities have a legal duty to set a balanced budget. We are happy to confirm that we believe that this budget meets this test.

We would also like to commend the council's team overall for the prudent, if tough, financial decisions it has taken in recent years which ensure that Brent is able to achieve a balanced budget, despite facing huge cuts from central government.

We are pleased there is no immediate prospect of the council falling into the kind of deep financial difficulties we have seen in places like Northamptonshire County Council.

## 2. Recommendations

### Speaking up

1. Advocate for the introduction of a locally set "tourist tax".

### Council Tax

2. The council continues with the approach of increasing Council Tax at the permitted annual rate, and encouraging development and regeneration that will bring housing to the borough.

### Budget or policy?

3. In future years an additional column or categorisation is added to the budget proposals. This would clearly define a proposal as one of: **Cut; Income generation; Service transformation; Efficiency.**

### Consultation

4. For future budget consultations, the council looks for clear comparisons with similar authorities and explicitly benchmarks itself against criteria such as number and quality of responses to ensure its processes are working well and continuing to improve.

### Sponsorship and partnerships

5. Brent to consider the idea of whether it could coordinate all public sector spending to boost local employment and business. We are ideally placed to act as a central coordinator bringing together all public sector bodies which procure services in Brent

and getting them to synchronise their pre-qualification policies. This would give the strong message that Brent is open for business.

#### Budget proposals

6. In future, full equality impact assessments should be done for every budget proposal. This is more transparent and helps prepare for possible outcomes from actions.

#### Housing

7. To ensure the selective licensing scheme can have the impact we all want to see, an investment is made into acquiring the temporary staff needed to clear the backlog and process new landlords quickly.
8. Housing Scrutiny Committee examines the issue of housing acquisition and what mitigation might be undertaken within the next six months. They should also consider the idea of merging First Wave and i4B into a single company, and if this would ensure that all of Brent's private property acquisitions have an additional social benefit goal.

#### Voluntary sector

9. Every time the council scales back funding to a voluntary organisation it simultaneously offers advice and support about where other funding may be available. Most specifically, it should actively promote the possibility of acquiring money from strategic CIL funds.

#### Borough of Culture

10. Strong overview and scrutiny of London Borough of Culture, by putting a backbench member on the board of the charitable trust which will oversee its delivery, and also with quarterly financial updates sent to the chair of the relevant scrutiny committee.

#### Social care

11. The introduction of 15-minute care visits does not go forward.
12. Recommissioning of care provisions is a large and important topic. A full report on the matter should come before the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee within six months.

#### Public health

13. Ceasing of untargeted smoking cessation services – policy should be reviewed in two years and if smoking rates have increased then it should be reconsidered.

#### Libraries

14. Serious consideration is given to the idea of transferring libraries to a charitable trust.
15. Every effort should be made to see if volunteers can take over some of the services to prevent closures.
16. Exploration of all options which help to maximise the use of library buildings and extract additional financial value from them.

#### Roundwood Youth Centre

17. Once the site is handed over, Brent must clearly measure and benchmark activities undertaken at the centre.
18. Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny does some further investigations into their long-term financial viability as part of its work programme on children's services.
19. The council and YBF to conduct a review of the best ways to promote what is happening at Roundwood.

#### Family hubs

20. Hubs should have a strong triage service, so anyone dropping into the centre is quickly assessed.
21. Council should pay close attention to public transport routes and geographical areas when choosing potential sites.

#### Environment

22. Launch of a 'Considerate Builders Scheme' which promotes local tradespeople who set high standards.
23. Some investment is made in providing more suitable bins and disposal areas at Brent's transport hubs – mainly tube stations and bus stops – to give people an easy and ethical way of disposing of items such as cigarette ends.
24. Additional income from increased licensing activity in the Wembley area should be ring-fenced for a project which will be of benefit to affected residents.
25. The benefits to urban wildlife of turning down street lights should feature prominently in future publicity around the concept.
26. Litter patrol activity should be targeted at areas missing out, so our response is joined-up.

27. The Cleaner Brent app should be amended so that people can report piles of uncollected leaves.
28. A review into how the council can ensure applications for new residential developments – in particular car-free developments – always include appropriate waste disposal options.
29. The council should try to persuade all sites in the WLWA to agree to a 'no black bags' policy.

#### Community safety

30. A report to come to RPR Scrutiny by the end of 2019 looking at how Brent can mitigate against cuts to the Met Patrol Plus Scheme, by beefing up our own internal patrol/enforcement teams.

#### Scrutiny

31. Instead of making cuts via the very blunt instrument of axing one committee, a clear budget for scrutiny is set and the three current chairs work with officers and backbenchers to come up with a proposal to deliver scrutiny within that budget.

#### Reserves

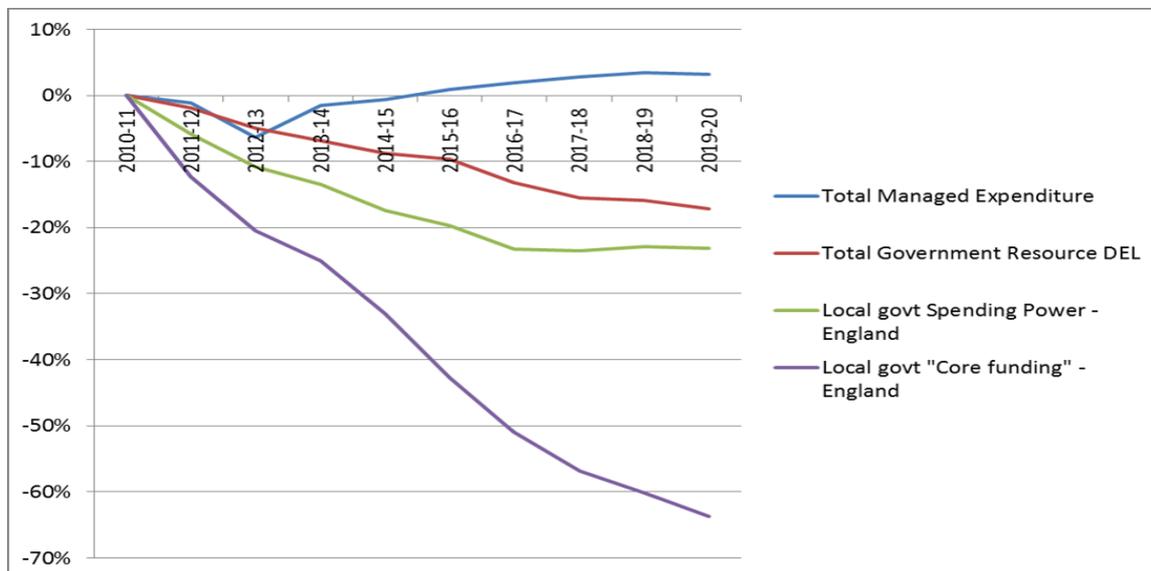
32. A paper on reserves is brought to RPR Scrutiny within six months. It should include information on each fund in reserves, when it was established and when it was last accessed.

### 3. Context

#### Local government budgets

During the course of our work, the Panel heard a bizarre rumour emanating from central government. This rumour was that austerity was now over.

Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case for local government. As this chart demonstrates, however the devolution of business rates to local government is achieved, there will still be a significant budget gap across the short- and medium-term future. As noted above, such gaps are illegal and must be filled no matter how much pain they cause.



Cumulative like-for-like change in public spending - 2010-11 to 2019-20

In our opinion, constrained finances are likely to be the new norm for local authorities. It is hard to envisage a return to the financial position that existed before 2010, a time when, as recently described to the Panel Chair by a retired Chief Financial Officer, 'a bad year was when your increased grant was just below the rate of inflation'. We therefore must continue to work innovatively to find savings and cuts and to closely target the resources we do have towards our top priorities.

#### Speaking up

It was clear from our conversations with cabinet members and officers, that there is a perception that county councils have a much stronger influence in central government than communities like Brent.

This is undoubtedly influenced by the political alignment of central government and most current county council administrations. We also heard that this is partially attributable to the fact that they have their own influencing body in the shape of the County Councils Network (CCN), which lists ‘securing concessions from national governments’ as one of its main activities in the ‘What we do’ section of its website.

The CCN recently took credit for a successful campaign which persuaded the Chancellor to announce ‘new funding for adult social care, children’s services, and for potholes’.

In theory, London Councils should perform a similar role for Brent and the other 31 London boroughs. However, there is a far greater divergence of interests between members of London Councils – for example inner and outer London boroughs and those controlled by different parties – than there appears to be amongst the councils in the CCN. This makes consistent lobbying on agreed policies and priorities more difficult.

The Panel appreciates some of the work being done to highlight the problems facing councils like Brent by advocates of our sector. We would particularly mention the Local Government Association’s “Breaking Point” campaign and the “Red Lines” campaign in London. If Brent can play its role in promoting and supporting similar initiatives in future this is something we would support.

At this point, we should note that many county councils may look at Brent’s situation with some degree of envy. The level of regeneration we have, particularly in Wembley, will ensure we have a Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) account far larger than most counties, and also that many thousands of young professionals – who are net contributors to council coffers – will be moving into Brent in coming years.

Despite this, we agree that it is hard to be heard without a voice and think it can only be a good thing for Brent to push vocally for its interests.

We would **strongly recommend** that a first step should be to campaign for the introduction of a locally set “tourist tax”. At present, hundreds of thousands of tourists visit our borough from around the world every year, particularly to attend events at the sporting and musical venues in Wembley. Of course, these people boost the local economy, but they also make asks of Brent’s finances in areas like street cleansing and licensing. Presently they make no direct contribution to the local authority to compensate for this.

This is not the case in many European countries or the United States, where visitors pay a small “tourist tax” every time they make an overnight stay in a hotel or rental property.

If Brent had the power to set something similar this would be fair, as it would ensure we have the funds to cope with the large numbers of people who visit us every year. It would also be proportionate as it could be set at the level of just a few pounds something that would surely not discourage tourists from attending the kinds of world class events that take place in our borough. Unfortunately, the law in the UK does not currently allow us to do this.

We do know that the Local Government Association has previously advocated something similar and we would hope that Brent plays its part to push this issue back to the top of the local government agenda.

## **The “B” word**

Brexit, and its potential impact on the local economy, loomed large in our thoughts throughout this process.

We welcome the fact that Brent published, as part of the December 2018 Full Council meeting, a report on the implications of Brexit and we certainly gave this consideration.

However, with so much uncertainty hanging over the process and with the picture changing on a daily basis it has been impossible to include a comprehensive section on what the impact of Brexit will be for Brent.

One area that we would like to highlight, however, is the potential impact on the council workforce. Around half of the employees who work for our biggest contractor, Veolia, and around ten per cent of directly employed staff in Brent, are from European Union countries. There would be huge consequences if all of these people were asked to leave following Brexit. Furthermore, if the government pushes through with plans for a £30,000 immigration salary cap this may make it extremely hard to recruit for many important positions within the council. The council needs to plan carefully for this eventuality.

## **Council Tax**

This budget is built on the assumption that Brent will continue to increase Council Tax at the annual rate permitted. We believe that local authorities have little choice but to do this, and

it is therefore no surprise at all that the majority of authorities in the UK are taking the same approach.

With the central government grant due to be abolished imminently, all councils will soon be entirely reliant on internal sources of revenue; council tax, business rates and charges. To ignore one of these few sources would not be prudent, particularly because council tax rises are cumulative, meaning if it is frozen at any point the income deferred is lost forever.

Of course, increasing council tax is not the only way to increase the council tax base and so we also must continue to encourage development and regeneration that will bring new housing to our borough. But as the below table demonstrates, Brent's current council tax levels are not in any way out of sync with London averages.

<b>London Borough</b>	<b>Band D 2018-2019</b>
Westminster	710.5
Wandsworth	745.81
City of London	933.41
Hammersmith and Fulham	1022.04
Kensington and Chelsea	1123.07
Newham	1258.77
Tower Hamlets	1280.37
Southwark	1329.54
Hackney	1374.67
Lambeth	1386.27
Hillingdon	1407.16
Barking and Dagenham	1411.85
Islington	1429.45
Ealing	1440.12
Bromley	1452.71
Hounslow	1461.99
Barnet	1483.57
Camden	1488.43
Merton	1492.89
<b>Brent</b>	<b>1496.54</b>
Lewisham	1498.10
Greenwich	1543.45
Redbridge	1549.98
Enfield	1555.40
Haringey	1575.80
Bexley	1588.04
Sutton	1602.75
Waltham Forest	1614.97

Croydon	1636.96
Havering	1658.06
Harrow	1688.92
Richmond upon Thames	1706.94
Kingston upon Thames	1770.97

We therefore **recommend** that the council continues with its approach.

## **4. Process**

### **Budget ... or policy?**

It is clear that the proposals in this budget go much wider than a few cuts to services. Also contained within the proposals are wider ranging reforms to the way we deliver services, like the move to a “Family Hub” model. This is an innovative reform that we believe the council would be right to consider whatever its financial pressures. In better times the savings accrued from this reform would perhaps be ploughed back into other priorities rather than used to plug a savings gap.

We believe the fact that all such ideas are only publicised as part of the budget setting process can create unnecessary suspicion amongst the public that they are solely being done to save money.

At a public meeting in December the Panel Chair mentioned the budget item relating to uniformed litter patrols as a positive development. One constituent told him that they did not understand why it would be in the budget as it is good news which does not cost money. In our experience people assume budget items are only about saving money and are never positive.

To overcome this, we **recommend** that in future years an additional column or categorisation is added to the budget proposals. This would clearly define a proposal as one of the following:

- **Cut** – a clear reduction in a service to save money, for example shutting the household recycling centre on certain days
- **Income generation** – when the council generates new revenue for itself, for example by selling its ICT services to another borough

- **Service transformation** – a political reform which has incidental savings, for example moving to a family hubs model
- **Efficiency** – a change which saves money without having an impact on frontline services, for example restricting colour printing at the civic centre

We believe that this approach would make it immediately clear to local people that the budget setting process is actually a much broader and more significant reform process than simply cutting services. Furthermore, if local people were aware that the budget papers also contained fresh new ideas that they could influence the development of, they may be more inclined to take part.

## Consultation

We can only commend the intentions of the council to carry out a thorough consultation. They have gone far beyond what is legally necessary or most would expect in an attempt to allow local residents to say what they think about the budget proposals. This includes using new technology such as the online budget calculator as well as getting out onto the streets for consultation events at local supermarkets.

However, we do have some doubts about the ability of local people to fundamentally change and influence what will be passed in the budget. To summarise simply:

- The council needs to save around £20 million in this two-year budget
- The budget proposals add up to roughly £26 million
- The proposals are ranked in order of the impact they will have, with the most difficult making up Appendix D of the proposals
- The ideas in Appendix D are extremely unpalatable and total around £6 million, so if these ideas are rejected, people will have to accept all of the other proposals to make the budget balance

Therefore, to some extent we believe the public are being presented with a *fait accompli* in the way the savings are ordered. As one member of our Panel put it; 'if I were a betting person, I think I could make quite good money on predicting which proposals will ultimately end up in the budget'.

This could perhaps be avoided in future by grouping the proposals by department or total savings, then people could categorise themselves what they believe to be most unpalatable and have a greater influence over what will ultimately be rejected from the budget proposals.

We heard that by now many people in Brent are suffering from “consultation fatigue” and perhaps not giving as many new ideas and free text responses as they once were. We therefore also **recommend** that for future budget consultations the council looks for some clear comparisons with similar authorities and explicitly benchmarks itself against criteria such as number and quality of responses to ensure its processes are working well and continuing to improve.

Consultation cannot be done for free – this year it has cost around £11,000 – and if the level of participation is stagnating or declining then our process must be questioned on a value for money basis.

## **Sponsorships and partnerships**

As ever, the Panel took a significant interest in the council's attempts to engage with business and generate income through additional sponsorship and partnerships. We are pleased that some progress seems to have been made since our recommendations in this area last year.

As we recommended, the council has undertaken a wider review of all potentially available advertising space in the borough and is set to bring some of the operation in house next year at the end of the current contract with JCDecaux. This will allow the borough to have more control over local advertising and hopefully generate more income.

However, one area we believe the council still can go further on is in the area of public sector procurement. Reforms to the machinery of government – local or national – to support our own businesses are long overdue in this country. It is amazing to think that the Government is still debating about whether it is a good idea to have an industrial strategy or not, decades after many of our competitors developed their own.

The head of the US Small Business Administration reports directly to the US President whereas none of the 15 direct reports to the permanent secretary in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) is responsible for small British businesses. No wonder 45 per cent of US Federal procurement spend goes to home grown American

small businesses - a figure which represents roughly eight times the lending rate of the UK Enterprise Finance Guarantee scheme after taking into account the relative sizes of the two economies.

Brent should not be afraid to think big, and realise the huge role it can play in creating a virtuous cycle where local businesses are supported to grow and then contribute back into the community and council coffers.

One in every seven pounds in the UK is spent by the state (equating to approximately 40% of GDP), making procurement one of the key levers that any public sector body has to boost business, employment and the economy.

Currently many businesses feel frustrated and locked out of the public sector procurement process. All public sector bodies set their own prequalification test for procurement contracts, so in any given area the council might ask for copies of accounts dating back five years and a biography of the CEO, the Fire Service might ask for six years of accounts and a biography of every director, the NHS Clinical Commissioning Group for something different altogether.

Some authorities are already realising this and working to coordinate all public sector spending in their area to boost local employment and business. Preston is one such and its model is also now being studied by academics in conjunction with local authorities in Hertfordshire.

We **recommend** that Brent Council joins this movement. We are ideally placed to act as a central coordinator bringing together all public sector bodies which procure services in Brent and get them to synchronise their pre-qualification policies. This would give a strong message that Brent is open for business and encourage businesses to base themselves here so that they can access many different procurement opportunities, and in the long term pay more business rates back into Brent.

We would emphasise that within this there would also be a golden opportunity to ensure further Living Wage payment within local supply chains if such a commitment became a more regular requirement to secure local procurement opportunities.

## 5. Budget proposals

### **Overview**

One of our biggest responsibilities is to scrutinise the budget proposals put forward by the cabinet. There are around 70 of these, which were set out in the report (which all members can access on ModGov) to cabinet in October 2018.

At our first meeting, we decided it would not be practical to conduct in depth investigations into each of these. We therefore selected a range of proposals which most concerned us and called in the relevant cabinet members and directors to question them further on their plans. The section below summarises and elaborates on these discussions and makes recommendations emerging from our work.

At points during this process we came across some proposals which were extremely hard to scrutinise. This is simply because there is no service delivery rationale for pursuing them, they are simply cuts to a service to plug the financial gap that the council has been placed in by central government.

It would be the easiest thing in the world for us to criticise these cuts and point out all of the ways in which they might impact on people in Brent. However, this would not be constructive scrutiny and would ultimately not achieve anything as there is no doubt that the council has to make cuts, and that cuts have consequences.

We will refer to some of these proposals as we move forward through this section but will also look at proposals which are more clearly policy reforms and new ideas, and suggest how we think they might be improved or enhanced.

The final thing to say at this point is that we do believe impact assessments can help councillors and the public to understand exactly what kind consequences cuts will have.

We are aware that in the past the decision has been made not to carry out detailed impact assessments on every plan, but we would **recommend** that in future this is done for every proposal. This is more transparent and helps the council to prepare for possible outcomes from our actions.

## Housing

We discussed at length proposal CWB007, which aims to extend the selective licencing scheme for private landlords to more parts of the borough and also have the positive attendant benefit of raising income through more licence fees.

We agree with the principles of selective licencing and believe that if done correctly this policy could certainly improve standards in the private rental sector in Brent. Our concern is that the current processing time thwarts these aims. There is still a backlog of applications and sign ups six months after the scheme was extended into five new wards. This means that a huge amount of officer (and ward member) time that could be used on enforcement and taking corrective action is only allocated to getting people on the register.

We therefore **recommend** that, to ensure the scheme can have the impact we all want to see, an investment is made into acquiring the temporary staff needed to clear the backlog and process new landlords quickly. Once an appropriate tipping point is reached and the large majority of landlords are signed up this can then mean all council resources in this area are used for enforcement and changing behaviours.

Additionally, we looked at proposal CWB010 which seeks to generate income for the council by acquiring 50 new properties for rent at the market rate under Brent's First Wave company. Unlike investments through i4B (Investing 4 Brent), this project does not have a clear social objective of acquiring affordable units for temporary accommodation, it is purely to raise income.

We understand the council's need to do this, but are still concerned that it may have an impact on some first-time buyers in Brent. It is difficult enough already to get onto the property ladder for many local people. If the council enters the private rental market – even in a limited way – its clout and financial backing will surely lead to it jumping ahead of first-time buyers in the race to acquire property as it comes onto the market. It would be difficult to ever measure accurately how many local young people might be forced to move out of the borough, or stay living with parents or in rented accommodation, as a result of this policy. But it is certainly an issue we should all be aware of.

As a result, we **recommend** that the Housing Scrutiny Committee examines this issue and what mitigation might be undertaken within the next six months. They should also consider

the idea of merging First Wave and i4B into a single company, and if this would ensure that all of Brent's private property acquisitions have an additional social benefit goal.

## **Voluntary sector**

Despite promises to reinvigorate a "Big Society", the policy of austerity has actually led to a hollowing out of the voluntary sector across the UK. Local government has for many years been one of the biggest funders of charities and voluntary organisations through grants and commissioning, but with so few funds in council coffers these have inevitably declined. This much was clear from our own experiences and interviews with officers and cabinet member on this topic.

In this context we understood the need for the council to further reduce the grants we offer to the voluntary sector through proposals like PPP001A. But we do not believe this should be the end of the story. We **recommend** that every time the council scales back funding to a voluntary organisation it simultaneously offers them advice and support about where other funding may be available. Most specifically, it should actively promote the possibility of acquiring money from strategic CIL funds for projects which will benefit people in the borough. Our aim should be to save as many projects as possible, even if we cannot directly fund them.

Similarly, we discussed the idea of aggregating CIL money for particular outputs. The clear example given was for tree planting. Currently, members and the council are encouraging community groups and individuals across the borough to apply for one off sums of money for tree planting in the area. We believe it would be more efficient if a certain amount of the CIL budget was allocated as the "Brent Trees Fund" which fund a certain number of trees per year. People would bid into this fund directly, making the process of allocating new trees more strategic and efficient.

## **Borough of Culture**

During the period of this two-year budget Brent will have the status as London Borough of Culture 2020. This is undoubtedly a great opportunity for Brent and we hope that communities across the borough enjoy what will be a fantastic occasion in the year our borough hosts the European Championships final.

However, it would be remiss of a budget scrutiny panel not to examine the financial implications of such a project at this point and we therefore also asked the relevant cabinet member several questions about their plans.

The simple facts about Borough of Culture costs are as follows:

- The total budget for the London borough of Culture is £4.6m.
- The Mayor of London and Greater London Assembly contribute £1.35m.
- The council have a series of bids, in progress or planned to make up the remaining amount.
- Examples of some of these are as follows: £250k from Paul Hamlin Foundation, £250k from Heritage Lottery Funding and £120k from the Arts Council.
- The Council has budgeted to provide £1m of which £250k is Neighbourhood CIL.
- With this in mind, there is currently a shortfall of £1.5m, for which the council is actively fundraising.

Overall this seems like a prudent financial approach with most of the income coming from external sources. The only problem would come if the council's fundraising efforts are not successful in raising some or all of the remaining £1.5m. We discovered that in this eventuality the current policy is to take what funding is needed from usable reserves.

Given the importance of this project and the not insignificant financial stake the council is putting into it, we believe that there needs to be strong overview and scrutiny of the project at all stages. The priority for this scrutiny would be to ensure that funds are spent appropriately and generate the maximum legacy for local residents, particularly young people who were at the heart of our bid.

We **recommend** that this is achieved by putting a backbench member on the board of the charitable trust which will oversee delivery of the year of culture, and also with quarterly financial updates sent to the chair of the relevant scrutiny committee.

## **Social care**

Proposal CWB019 – to introduce 15-minute care visits is rightly included in the “Most Difficult” appendix. When this idea was proposed a couple of years ago the Panel took a strong stance that this should only be done as a final resort. Such a reform would undoubtedly have a negative impact on the most vulnerable.

According to research by Unison (*Suffering Alone at Home*, January 2016) a large number of councils do commission 15-minute home care visits including 45 per cent of those in London. Their research suggests that such short visits are affecting the ability of homecare workers to deliver quality care. The United Kingdom Homecare Association, which represents providers, has further said that it is concerned that domiciliary care such as help with washing, dressing and meal preparation cannot be crammed into a 15-minute slot.

We should be proud to stand apart from the many councils which have chosen to take this drastic step whilst not considering other income generation options, such as charges for garden waste. We therefore clearly **recommend** that this proposal does not go forward.

We also discussed at length the council's plans for recommissioning its care provisions, the risks and rewards that come with having fewer providers and the implications for our Real Living Wage commitments. This is a very large and important topic and therefore we **recommend** that a full report on the matter comes before the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee within six months.

## **Public health**

It is a relatively recent development that local authorities have been responsible for public health provision and received a ring-fenced grant from Public Health England to deliver this service. Even within this short time period the level of funding for this service has been continually cut – a trend which was confirmed in an announcement from the Department for Health and Social Care made whilst we were finalising this report – in a way which we doubt would have been done had funding remained with the NHS and its protected budget.

Therefore, the council is still developing the best possible model to deliver these services and ensure that all appropriate schemes are funded inside the ring fence and not taken from the general pot.

We support this broad strategic work but also have some specific concerns about individual public health proposals. For example, CWB003 ceases untargeted smoking cessation services. We acknowledge that this might have excellent effects on those who most need support to break this life shortening habit, but remain concerned that it could lead to some increase in smoking amongst the general population who will no longer get any support. We therefore **recommend** that this policy is reviewed in two years' time and if general smoking rates have increased then it should be reconsidered.

Likewise, CWB004 would decommission the universal health check offer to target those at higher risk. Again, a general review of this policy should be undertaken at the appropriate time.

## **Libraries**

CWB006 proposes to reduce library hours and offers no argument that residents will benefit from a better service if this is implemented. We do not agree with this proposal and believe it should have been placed in the “Most Difficult” appendix.

We are pleased that residents in Brent know they have six council-run libraries in the borough that they can go to seven days per week. Scaling back on this universal service would undermine the trust the council has slowly rebuilt with the community following the closure of several libraries before 2014. We also believe there is a real danger that demand will be dampened if people become confused about which libraries they can go to at certain times and which they can go to at others.

There are other options we feel the council could consider before passing this proposal. The first of these is transferring the library service to a charitable trust as other authorities – including Glasgow, Luton and Fife - have done. If our library service were run in this way, the six buildings could become eligible for business rates relief of at least 80 per cent, presenting significant savings without a loss in the service.

We **recommend** that the council gives serious consideration to this idea.

Secondly, the largest mistake, in our view, that the council made before adopting its proposal of library closures a few years ago, was refusing to give local community and volunteer groups any opportunity to run the service. We **recommend** that this time every effort should be made to see if volunteers can take over some of the services to prevent closures. We are aware that some libraries require a permanent security presence and that this work cannot be done by volunteers, but this is not the case in every library and so should not prevent a volunteer team from keeping these branches open.

Thirdly, we **recommend** that Brent explore all options which help to maximise the use of library buildings and extract additional financial value from them. For example, residents in flats above shops often struggle to get hold of council recycling bags for their waste. If they could collect these easily from their local library this would be easier for them and give the

library further status as a local hub for council services. Likewise, there is much potential to rent out event space in some of our libraries, like the upstairs floors in Harlesden Library, and we think more work needs to be done to sweat those assets.

This are just some starting ideas, but it is our fundamental belief that any alternative to make savings in the service are considered before we resort to the drastic step of partial closures.

## **Schools**

Proposal CYP001 proposes to fund some statutory education functions from the Dedicated Schools Grant. We agree with the lead member and director that this would be fair and appropriate as we are only requesting around £250k from a pot of over £300m.

However, we are naturally wary of any budget proposal over which the council is not fully in control. This money would need to be approved by the Schools Forum an organisation of hard working volunteers we have a huge amount of respect for. We appreciate the hard work Brent has done to build up a relationship of trust with this organisation by openly sharing all of its plans around school funding in the past and would be hopeful that Brent's bid is successful.

Perhaps, in future, budget proposals which are contingent on external approval should be highlighted as such to ensure all possible contingencies are made to cover the gap if the bid is unsuccessful.

## **Roundwood Youth Centre**

Members of the Panel were very interested in proposal CYP005 which relates to the future of the Roundwood Youth Centre. All agree that the facility is one with great potential but is currently underused and is therefore a drain on the council's revenue budget.

The council should not wish to dispose of this asset, but even if it did, this would not be straightforward as the facility was built with a National Lottery grant of £4.997m as part of the Government's Myplace programme. Under the terms of the grant agreement, the council is required to notify the Cabinet Office of any planned changes of use or ownership and could be required to repay the grant in whole or in part.

Therefore, the only solution is to increase the use of the site. We are satisfied that the proposal CYP005 has a strong potential to achieve this. It would establish alternative

education provision on site for local children who have been temporarily suspended from school. This would actually enhance our local offer as currently pupils have to travel out of the borough to places like Hammersmith when under a school suspension. Crucially this would mean that the youth centre is not empty and costing money to maintain during the school day.

It is far from ideal, in our opinion, that this new school would be a free school, but unfortunately the law ensures that new schools opening are always outside of local education authority control. Perhaps a change of central government policy in future may allow the school to one day become part of the Brent family.

The arrangement is also not perfect for Brent because the asset would transfer to Brent Special Academies Trust meaning any additional income they derive from hiring out other rooms on site would not be retained by the council. However, we will retain some oversight of the organisation as a senior officer will sit on the Trust's board.

The proposal would hand over youth provision at the site to a new provider, with the Brent Youth Foundation in particular having expressed an interest in becoming that provider. The council's clear intention is that more activities would be run at the Centre than there are currently. We **recommend** that once the site is handed over Brent must clearly measure and benchmark this.

On the face of it, Brent Youth Foundation is an excellent partner to deliver these services. It is a local charity which exists to deliver services to young people in just this way. We would, however, note that much of their funding comes from the City Bridge Trust and John Lyons' grants. We believe some more investigation needs to be done into the long-term viability of these sources. We would therefore **recommend** that the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny does some further investigations into their long-term financial viability as part of its work programme on children's services.

Finally, we would note that activities are only beneficial to Brent's young people if they are sufficiently advertised and promoted. Members of the Panel who represent the wards surrounding the Youth Centre report that even those young people who live very close by have often not heard about activities on their doorstep. Therefore, we **recommend** that the council and their new partner conduct a review, including asking young people themselves, of the best ways to promote what is happening at Roundwood to the target audience.

## Family Hubs

As already noted earlier in this report, the move to a “Family Hubs” model (proposal CYP008), is a policy which could have benefits to service delivery as well as making overall savings.

To summarise, the plan is close some children’s centres (though we noted that the name sometimes gives a misleading description, few children’s centres are full buildings which are open on a daily basis, most are single rooms, often attached to schools, which deliver specific services at limited times) to consolidate our offer at fewer sites. These sites would then deliver more comprehensive services all the way to the age of 18 and become a central hub for families in each area of Brent.

The bulk of this reform will be delivered in the second year of this budget and so many questions about the precise make-up of the new hubs have yet to be answered. It is probably beneficial that the council has a bit of extra breathing space to develop this policy as 2020 will also see the end of the Troubled Families Programme funding. The new service will have to be designed in a way to compensate for this.

With this in mind we would make **two recommendations** to cabinet as they seek to finalise the policy.

Firstly, we think it is hugely important that hubs have a strong triage service, so that anyone dropping into a centre is quickly assessed and directed to the most appropriate means of support. The Resource and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee saw the importance of this at its recent site visit to the Harlesden Hub, a project which operates along similar lines.

Secondly, we would suggest that when the council is choosing sites for the hubs they pay close attention to public transport routes as well as geographic areas. For example, as the crow flies, Kilburn and Kensal Green are not far apart, but there are few direct transport links which would make it very hard for residents in one of the two area to access services in the other.

## Environment

We have no doubt that members of the public will have many concerns with savings, cuts and reforms proposed in the environment department. This is because it is perhaps the only universal set of services delivered by Brent. Not everyone in our borough accesses

children's services and not all of us will need social care. But everyone has a bin that needs to be collected and everyone walks on our streets or drives on our roads. This means that any changes in the public realm will be controversial, even if they do not specifically affect the poorest or most vulnerable.

We discussed various proposals in this department with the lead member and relevant officers. To begin, one member of the panel was particularly passionate about ensuring that builders, whose use of vans and skips damages pavements and curbs, are charged for this damage. For works that require planning permission, or where Brent is the building regulation authority, this is easier to achieve as we can demand a bond up front for the use of skip, for example, and keep this if damage is made.

In circumstance where permission is not required the council will not know work is going on. So, if a skip is dropped in a resident's front garden and the crane dropping it off damages the pavement in the process we will eventually incur the cost as no bond will have been charged.

Our imperfect solution to this conundrum was to **recommend** the introduction of a "Considerate Builders Scheme", as has already been seen in Westminster, in our borough. Those who sign up to the principles of this would get a window sticker and be listed on our website. This would benefit the builders and also raise awareness more generally about the need to be considerate. All materials pushed out about the scheme would have to advertise a way for residents to whistle blow when builders do not follow the principles of the scheme in order to ensure some level of oversight.

Moving on, we welcomed the expansion of litter patrol activity in proposal R&E006 and that an in-house service will give the council more control over where patrols are targeted. This seems to follow on exactly from recommendations made by the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee a couple of years ago. We detected that the cabinet and senior officers had assumed that councillors would be uneasy with litter patrol activity that was low level, such as fining people for dropping cigarette ends outside of tube stations. In fact, no one on the panel felt like this and all believed that tackling low level problems will help to ensure that people do not progress to more serious environmental offences. Though we would add a **recommendation** at this point that some investment is made in providing more suitable bins and disposal areas at Brent's transport hubs – mainly tube stations and bus stops – to give people an easy and ethical way of disposing of these items.

When it came to proposal R&E008, which predicts an increase in income of £50k due to more licensed activity in the Wembley area, we did have a clear **recommendation**. Many residents who live close to the stadium feel that their lives are disrupted on event days and do not receive sufficient compensation for this despite the boost to local businesses. Therefore, we suggested that this additional income is ring fenced for a project which directly benefits these residents in Wembley.

We supported the provisions of proposal R&E001 which refers to turning down many of the street lights across the borough. Many councillors reported that people have contacted them asking for less bright lights outside their houses and we also know that urban wildlife benefits from lower lighting levels at night. We **recommend** that this latter aspect, often overlooked, features prominently in future council publicity about the scheme.

After discussing these overall positive proposals, we turned to more controversial ideas - which, like the libraries example discussed above - can only be described as cuts.

R&E002A/B remove litter patrols and litter bins from zone 5, which constitutes 456 roads or a quarter of land in the borough. We were less concerned about the removal of litter bins on residential streets which often attracts additional illegally dumped waste, but felt that stopping litter picking would lead to less clean and attractive pavements. Of course, as already stated every department must contribute to savings and cuts and these will sadly have consequences, so we do not feel as though we can oppose these proposals out right.

Instead, as mitigation we **recommend** that the litter patrol activity already discussed is targeted at the areas missing out so our response to problems is joined up and collaborative. We also **recommend** that the Cleaner Brent app is amended so that people can report piles of uncollected leaves through it, as it was noted without people on the street such issues may not be noticed.

Most difficult of all was R&E001A which proposes to partially close the Abbey Road Household Recycling Centre, probably for two non-consecutive days each week. We felt that a complete closure of the site would be a step too far, but some reduced hours could be justified given the huge financial pressures weighing down on the authority. Some members of the Panel suggested that this change might increase illegal rubbish dumping in the borough, however, a majority of us felt that this was unlikely. The kind of resident who does the right thing in taking their waste to the recycling centre is unlikely to become a law

breaker and dump their waste on the street because they cannot gain access on two days a week, no matter how frustrated they might feel.

We also noted that there will be a significant group of local residents who will not be affected by this change as they find it extremely difficult to access the site at all. This are primarily people in the south of the borough where car ownership is low. Without a car it is pretty near impossible to take bulky waste to Abbey Road and with the council approving more and more car free developments we will have even more residents in this position in future.

It seems clear that things can be done through the planning system to provide solutions to this problem. We **recommend** a review into how the council can ensure that applications for new residential developments – in particular car free developments – always include appropriate waste disposal options.

Overall, we do believe that not as much income is generated from the Abbey Road site as could be. This is primarily because it is run by the West London Waste Alliance and we do not have full control over it. The Chair of the Panel recently attended a national waste conference where Welsh authorities reported a percentage increase of three figures in income generated through textile sales. They achieved this through a “no black bags policy”, meaning that residents could not simply throw black bags into the general waste section of their recycling centre. All material had to be opened and separated. This led to many old clothes being salvaged to be sold onto textile traders. Brent could only benefit from such a scheme if all sites in the WLWA agreed to the policy and to split the profits. It will not be easy to persuade them all to do so but we **recommend** that the council does try.

## **Community safety**

The main community safety proposal in this budget is the ending of a service. Currently, the council funds 12 additional local police officers through the Met Patrol Plus scheme. Members and residents are offered two alternatives in this area: R&E022 would halve the service and save £200k, and R&E022A would abolish it completely and save £400k.

Reluctantly, and aware once again that cuts have consequences, we would agree with the council’s plans to end this service. Ultimately, we believe that the council has many, many vital services that it needs to deliver to the local community, from social care to fostering, and it is not sustainable to take money away from these to fund a service that another part of government – in this case the Home Office – should be responsible for.

Of course, the situation should be closely monitored, and we should keep a particular eye on how the new three borough command structure influences levels of local policing. All members should also continuously advocate for additional policing in their wards and ask every resident to report incidents so the local crime database is as accurate as possible.

Finally, we would **recommend** that the council bring a report to Resources and Public Realm scrutiny by the end of 2019 which looks at how Brent can mitigate against this cut by beefing up our own internal patrol and enforcement teams.

## **Scrutiny**

This budget contains many difficult cuts that will directly impact upon the lives of our residents. We therefore did not want to spend much time in this report focusing on ourselves but we do feel that proposal PPP007, to reduce the number of scrutiny committees from three to two, should be questioned. The number of cabinet members recently increased by two, and therefore it is reasonable to question if the number of councillors involved in scrutinising the cabinet should be decreased at the same time the number of councillors in cabinet is increased.

Despite this, we do recognise that it is beholden upon us to make savings like every other department of the council. So, we **recommend** that instead of making these cuts via the very blunt instrument of axing one committee, the three current chairs are given a clear budget for scrutiny and work with officers and backbenchers to come up with a proposal to deliver scrutiny within that budget. We would do this by starting from the bottom up, like the council's Outcome Based Reviews, and not simply slicing away from the existing three committee structure. We also believe it would be essential to benchmark our scrutiny service against those of other boroughs when conducting this process.

## 6. Reserves

We took some time to review of all of the ring fenced and general reserves held by the council as part of our budget scrutiny process.

When councillors, and members of the public, talk about “reserves” they are usually only referring to the general reserves pot which currently sits at a safe, but comparatively low, figure of £12million. In fact, it is probably safe to say that many people think this is the only money the council holds in reserve. But of course, there are many other pots of ring-fenced money in the council’s accounts which have been established and set aside for particular projects over the years.

We were assured that these are assessed annually to see if there is still a need for them. Despite this, we think it would be helpful to cast a new set of eyes on these and so **recommend** that a paper on reserves is brought to the resources and public realm scrutiny committee within six months. The paper should include information on each fund in reserves, when it was established and when it was last accessed. This information is currently not collated together in a single usable document and so this could be an informative exercise for the whole council, driven by the scrutiny process.

## 7. Conclusion

We hope this report is seen as a fair and balanced one. We have tried at all times to understand the huge financial pressures that the council is under as a result of the severe reduction of the central government grant.

Many of the cuts in the budget proposals are unpalatable, but we do not oppose these for opposition’s sake because we know if these were taken out of the budget money would have to be found elsewhere and that such alternative cuts could be even more painful.

We have tried to make constructive comments about how some of these negative impacts could be mitigated and also praised the council for its more innovative ideas wherever appropriate.

This report is not the end of the budget scrutiny process and we look forward to discussing our recommendations, and the budget as a whole, in more depth at future scrutiny, cabinet and full council meetings.