



Item 7.2: Questions from Brent Youth Parliament

Full Council – 23 November 2020

1. Question from Brent Youth Parliament to Councillor Tom Stephens, Lead Member for Schools, Employment & Skills

As part of the Council's Stronger Communities strategy, particularly its focus on 'active citizenship and participation,' would the Council consider raising awareness for, and encouraging, secondary schools across the borough to implement student Associate Governor roles into their school governance bodies?

The average age of a school governor/trustee is 55 years old, and so supporting Brent schools to implement youth voice directly into a school governance body will arguably be extremely beneficial to not only the school itself, but also a participating student's skillset and employability.

Response

Thank you for this question and for the opportunity to restate Brent Council's full commitment to ensuring young people's voices are represented and heard. Brent Council's Constitution enshrines the right of young people to have a voice in the Council's business, as the questions you are asking today demonstrate. The long standing and successful Brent Youth Parliament which you represent is a further articulation of this commitment to youth voice, with Brent being one of the founders of the Youth Parliament movement.

As Cabinet member, I will write to Brent secondary schools to encourage their consideration of student associate member roles into their school governance bodies. As almost all Brent secondary schools are academies, this change would need to be incorporated into the Articles of Association for their Trust. Regulations state all Governors, including Associate Governors, are required to be at least 18 years old. An associate member role has previously been in place in some Brent schools. An associate member brings specific expertise and knowledge to a governing board, and whilst they don't have full governor status with voting rights at full governing board meetings, associate members can participate in board meetings and can be permitted to vote at committee level.

As you rightly recognise in how you have phrased your question, this would be a decision for each individual Trust rather than the council. However as stated above, I would encourage all schools to adopt them, as I recognise the considerable value the role could bring to enriching Brent schools.

2. Question from Brent Youth Parliament to Councillor Eleanor Southwood, Lead Member for Housing & Welfare Reform

Following Brent Council Cabinet accepting the recommendations of the Brent Poverty Commissions report in September, and the steps outlined within the report for their implementation, can the Lead Member provide an update on what the Council is doing to address the rising poverty rates in Brent and to provide families with support at this difficult time.

Response:

I would like to thank the Youth Parliament for raising this issue and giving me the opportunity to explain what the Council is doing to implement the recommendations that the Brent Independent Poverty Commission published in August. As I said at the time, the pandemic has highlighted the impact poverty has in blighting lives and wasting potential and resources, making people more vulnerable to illness. It has also shown how easy it is for events to tip people into poverty. The reality is that ten years of cuts to local services have also left many people struggling to get the support they need. The Commission started work before the pandemic and the issues raised and recommendations made would be urgent at any time, but as the question rightly points out, recent events mean these issues have never been more immediately pressing.

These recent events have underlined how essential local leadership is in facing crises on this scale. The immediate and longer-term impacts of the pandemic and future challenges to the national and local economies just reinforce the importance of the council prioritising actions and resources on those areas that are most important for the people of Brent. Both in meeting the current situation and ensuring the recovery does not leave anyone behind, tackling Poverty is a key priority for the council.

The Independent Poverty Commission based its findings on a comprehensive review of why so many people in Brent live in poverty and what this means to peoples' everyday lives. But it also explained what is being done to tackle the issue and how this can be taken further. What the report said about the often life-changing potential of the things already being done to help people in poverty proved that there are things we can do about it. We particularly asked the Commission to look at what works, what doesn't – and what could be done better, providing us with clear and evidence-based ways forward to improve things.

The Poverty Commission report sets out future actions the Council and its partners can take to make a real difference to peoples' lives, help realise their potential and make Brent an even better place to live. We have taken the report's recommendations to develop the four delivery plans that will be discussed tonight at Full Council. These cover:

- **Housing**
- **Economy and Jobs**
- **Financial Inclusion and Welfare**
- **Overview Recommendations**

We are not starting from scratch; work is already underway in many of these areas. But we also want to plan for future activity, building on progress so far to drive wider and more lasting change. We will use every opportunity to tackle poverty, working with partners across sectors, different teams across the council and our residents, including Brent's young people. Our work will be evidence-based both to guarantee resources are used to maximum effectiveness, and so we can see what works – and stop doing anything that works less well.

But we know the Council can't solve the problem by itself - if the causes of poverty in Brent, its neighbourhoods and communities are to be tackled, we must draw on the knowledge, perspectives, resources and experience of all the individuals and organisations working on these issues (as set out in recommendation F – overview recommendations). To help with this we have brought together a consultative group with representation from councillors and local, regional and community organisations to encourage joint working and help us all learn from each other, making the best use of the links different organisations have with local communities and agreeing practical steps that should be taken to address poverty in Brent. This group will advise on progress, promote joint work and support the council in the successful delivery of the Commission's recommendations. I would welcome the chance to have a conversation with you about how BYP might be involved in this work.

The key actions we will be taking across the other action plans include:

Housing

The Commission identified rocketing housing costs as one of the key factors behind poverty in Brent. To tackle this:

- We are continuing to deliver one of the biggest house building programmes in London.
- The current and draft Local Plan already have a strategic target to secure 50% of new homes as affordable over the plan period.
- We will undertake a review of the Private Rented Sector.
- We are adopting a housing led approach, to tackle single homelessness.

Economy and Jobs

The Commission found that precarious and low-paying jobs meant that too many who are in work are still poor. To tackle this:

- A year-long campaign "Keep Brent Working" has been launched to support residents facing job losses throughout the pandemic.
- Brent Works is also working with employers to recruit 16-24 year olds on Universal Credit on six-month job placements.
- Our Work and Health programme focuses on those who are long term unemployed, creating a support framework to enable them to gain employment.
- A Digital Inclusion package, which includes support for developing digital skills, is in place as part of the Residents' Support Fund.

- Work is currently underway to roll out full fibre connectivity across the council's housing stock and key community spaces.

Financial Inclusion and Welfare

The Commission found that the welfare system too often operates in ways that do not give people a way out of poverty. To tackle this:

- The council introduced a resident support scheme in July 2020 and we recently doubled the amount of money available. Residents can apply for a grant or interest free loan. Applications went live in August 2020 and the scheme will finish by April 2021. The council has received over 2,000 applications.
- The council has funded 2 posts (to 31 March 2021) at Brent Citizens Advice to support action in this area. It has also commissioned Hillingdon Credit Union to deliver the interest free loan element.
- The resident support scheme and the Hubs advisory service ensure that support is targeted where it is needed most. This includes referral to charities and community organisations.
- We are continuing to work with health partners in mitigating the impact of the pandemic including targeted communication working with local community leaders.
- Work is underway in developing a Youth and Community Strategy for Young People.
- Tackling fuel poverty is a key element of our Climate Emergency Strategy.

This is only the start. Poverty is not a new problem for Brent and it is not one we can solve overnight. To make a difference everyone with our Borough's future wellbeing at heart will have to work together, come up with ideas, share resources and learn from one another. The Commission's report shows this can make a real difference and the Council is committed to doing its part.