



## Questions from the Opposition and Other Non-Cabinet Members

### Full Council – 20 November 2023

**1. Question from Councillor Rajan-Seelan to Councillor Donnelly-Jackson (Cabinet Member for Customers, Communities and Culture)**

British Tamils have enriched and continue to enrich the fabric of the United Kingdom. In Brent we have a longstanding Tamil community that have contributed to this borough in an array of fields, from business to healthcare, and sports to education. North West London also has the largest Tamil community in the country.

January is Tamil Heritage Month, which part of a nationwide programme to encourage communities and organisations to connect with the rich cultural heritage of British Tamils.

Will the Cabinet Member for Customers, Communities and Culture and Brent Council work to ensure that the contribution of British Tamils is highlighted by Brent Council as part of Tamil Heritage Month?

**Response:**

We are committed to celebrating the rich diversity across Brent, this includes recognising and amplifying the contributions of the Tamil community.

This year our staff networks organised an online session with a Tamil author who spoke to staff about Tamil Heritage and how Pongal is celebrated. They are seeking to organise another lunch and learn next year for Tamil Heritage Month.

Additionally, Ealing Road Library has a Tamil Reading Club who come together around every month to celebrate their culture. For Tamil Heritage Month the Council works with the reading club to help organise their annual celebration which usually consists of speakers, musicians and dancers. We are working with them again this year to support and help organise their activities.

**2. Question from Councillor Ahmed to Councillor Krupa Sheth (Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure & Climate Action):**

Over the last month residents have been adjusting to changes to recycling in the borough. We know from our successful trial last year with over 5,000 households, that change does take time to crystallise. Last year the trial saw an increase in recycling with the blue bag from 50% in the first week to 71% in the eighth week – and crucially, an exceptionally low contamination rate of 1%.

Will the Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure and Climate Action, outline how the changes will prevent more recyclable waste from going to landfill and support our wider environmental goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2023?

**Response:**

We have seen a 50% increase in tonnage of paper and cardboard collected through October, the first month of the new service. By removing paper and cardboard from the dry mixed recycling stream, contamination is at a low 1%. The higher quality of paper and cardboard collected results in higher rates of fibre recycled. Further data and results will take at least 12 weeks to spot any additional trends.

It is important to note that recycling, even if rejected due to high contamination, does not go to landfill; any rejections are sent to an energy recovery facility.

### **3. Question from Councillor Aden to Councillor Knight (Cabinet Member for Housing, Homelessness & Renters Security)**

Analysis by the LGA has shown that temporary accommodation has risen by 89 per cent over the past decade to 104,000 households at the end of March 2023 – the highest figures since records began in 1998 – costing councils at least £1.74 billion in 2022/23.

The severe shortage of social housing means councils like Brent are being forced to pay to house people in private temporary accommodation, including hotels and B&Bs.

Will the Cabinet Member for Housing, Homelessness and Renters Security set out some of the measures this council is taking to address the unprecedented surge in homelessness applications; the use of Temporary Accommodation and set out some of the contextual factors which are fuelling the housing crisis in Brent?

#### **Response:**

The Housing Needs Service has seen a 22% increase in demand from homeless households from 2021/22 to 2022/23. Whilst the COVID – 19 pandemic, associated lockdowns and the ban on Private Rented Sector evictions have been a factor in this growth, demand for homelessness services continues to grow, driven by inflation and the cost-of-living crisis. There has been a further 24% increase in demand in Q2 of 2023/24, compared with the same quarter last year. If demand continues at the same rate, the service will receive a total of 7,500 applications this financial year, an average of 144 applications every week.

This extraordinary increase in demand from homeless households, coupled with the contraction of the Private Rented Sector (PRS) properties available at the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) level, used to prevent and relieve homelessness, and to end the main homelessness duty, has resulted in a projected £4.5m overspend in the Temporary Accommodation (TA) budget, as well as a £7.5m projected subsidy loss which are directly related to the pressures the service is under.

A Temporary Accommodation (TA) Supply and Spend project has been set up to tackle the overspend. The project has 5 strands to help reduce the cost of TA / Housing Benefit (HB) subsidy spend, as well as increasing the supply of more cost-effective TA.

- 1 - Existing HB claims
- 2 - Affordability criteria for TA placements
- 3 - New and alternative supply of TA
- 4 - Use of housing land
- 5 – Voids

Work has started to decant the TA placements creating the highest costs to subsidy, the majority of which are in nightly paid accommodation in High

Wycombe and source alternative TA accommodation. However progress is slow, due to the lack of affordable accommodation available and the ongoing demand of new homeless households presenting every day.

These issues are not unique to Brent. A Homelessness and Temporary Accommodation summit was held on 31 October, organised by the District Councils' Network (DCN) and Eastbourne Borough Council. 158 councils attended the summit and agreed to submit a letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, urgently calling on the Government to:

- Raise Local Housing Allowance rates to a level that will cover at least 30% of local market rent and commit to annual uprating.
- Provide £100m additional funding for Discretionary Housing Payments in 2023-24 and an additional £200m in 2024-25.
- Provide a £150m top-up to the Homelessness Prevention Grant for 2024-25.
- Review the cap for housing benefit subsidy rate for local authority homelessness placements.
- Develop policy to stimulate retention and supply in the privately rented sector.
- Give councils the long-term funding, flexibility and certainty needed to increase the supply of social housing.

Councillor Muhammed Butt added his name to this letter, as Leader of the Council.

**4. Question from Councillor Hirani to Councillor Krupa Sheth (Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure & Climate Action):**

Given the serious concerns being raised by residents across the borough with regards to the Blue Bag Recycling Scheme will the Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure and Climate Action agree to commission an independent report on the roll out of the scheme and its financial implications. It does not appear that this scheme has been properly thought through and should therefore be suspended until a full investigation and report can be provided to Full Council. This is strongly backed by an e-Petition with over 2000 signatures demanding the scheme be cancelled.

In advance of this, can the Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure and Climate Action also address the following operational issues:

- (1) How is it possible to keep these bags dry during the rain events we have had recently?
- (2) Where are residents expected to store these bags?
- (3) What is expected to happen to cardboard and paper when these bags are full? Should this be placed into the Blue/Black Bin?
- (4) Residents in flats do not have these blue bags so what are they expected to do with their cardboard and paper?
- (5) Was training given to Veolia when dealing with these blue bags as it appears that on some occasions the cardboard/ paper has been blown around and not collected?
- (6) How much does this scheme cost and are there any actual savings? Can you show the figures?

**Response:**

**(1) How is it possible to keep these bags dry during the rain events we have had recently?**

The blue sack is weighted at the bottom to avoid it being blown away and is weatherproof when the lid is fully sealed using the Velcro strips, to protect the contents inside. Please ensure the lid is sealed. Any faulty/leaking sacks will be replaced free of charge.

**(2) Where are residents expected to store these bags?**

The sack can be folded and stored inside when not in use or kept outside by your other bins where there is space to do so. Residents can choose whether to store their sack indoors or outdoors, so long as it is presented at the kerbside on the scheduled collection day.

We appreciate that not all residents will have space to store their blue sack indoors. We advise those residents to transfer their paper and flattened cardboard to the blue sack at their convenience, as they have previously done with their blue lidded recycling bin, placing it between other bin containers.

**(3) What is expected to happen to cardboard and paper when these bags are full? Should this be placed into the Blue/Black Bin?**

If the paper and cardboard sack becomes full, residents may present any excess paper and card in a bundle next to their sack on collection day.

Please **do not** place paper and card in your blue-lidded recycling bin, as collections crews will be instructed not to collect these bins on the same week as the blue sack.

Residents are advised not leave any excess cardboard out alongside their sack when rain or strong winds are predicted. Instead, we are advising those residents who continuously have more paper and cardboard for one blue sack, to order an additional sack. Residents can order a second bag or additional bags for free.

**(4) Residents in flats do not have these blue bags so what are they expected to do with their cardboard and paper?**

Those in flats with shared communal bins are not part of the changes and will continue to use the large recycling bins for mixed recycling, which is being collected separately to kerbside properties.

**(5) Was training given to Veolia when dealing with these blue bags as it appears that on some occasions the cardboard/ paper has been blown around and not collected?**

Training has been given to collection staff ahead of the recycling collections with further training and monitoring ongoing with collection issues occurring and being reported to Veolia.

**(6) How much does this scheme cost and are there any actual savings? Can you show the figures?**

The change to alternate weekly twin stream recycling collections for street level households was estimated to save the council £1.2m per annum on annual disposal costs for waste when compared to the weekly comingled recycling collection (where all recycling goes in one bin).

We will be monitoring the impact of the service in the coming weeks and months in order to assess the impact of the service change on our recycling and saving targets.

**5. Question from Councillor Georgiou to Councillor Knight (Cabinet Member for Housing, Homelessness and Renters Security):**

There are far too many people in Brent without access to a genuinely affordable home.

Recently the Labour Cabinet had to confirm a £13 million overspend in the Council's finances due to the rising costs of temporary accommodation. Failures in providing new homes on a timely basis and within budget are therefore very costly both in terms of their social and financial impact.

In view of this can the Cabinet Member for Housing, Homelessness & Renters Security confirm:

- (1) The Current position on the Altamira Morland Gardens housing project and whether it is being aborted because the planning permission may have expired.
- (2) The total cost of this project in terms of architects, builders, decanting and other costs.
- (3) How much GLA investment has been lost.
- (4) The impact of the failures and delays in the Altamira project on the Twybridge Way site also in Stonebridge.
- (5) If, in view of the above, and Altamira's historic importance, the current project will now be aborted and a more sympathetic project which retains the Villa at its heart will now be pursued.

**Response:**

- (1) The Current position on the Altamira Morland Gardens housing project and whether it is being aborted because the planning permission may have expired.**

Brent Council is facing a £13million [overspend](#) this year that is mainly due to rapidly rising homelessness. The overspend is despite Brent receiving the largest [New Homes Bonus](#) in the country for 2023/24 thanks to its impressive delivery of much needed new homes.

The Council played a direct role in achieving this, with 846 homes completed to date, 1,265 homes on site (not including Morland Gardens) and a plan to develop a further 572 homes for social rent.

The Council has continued to build, despite national and global factors affecting the cost of building homes. Increases in inflation, material costs and labour shortages have affected all developers' ability to build. Despite this, the Council has continued to prioritise developing new homes and is focussed on increasing affordable housing for Brent residents.

I can confirm the planning permission for this scheme expired. The project is now being reviewed and a decision will be taken to Cabinet in December 2023.

**(2) The total cost of this project in terms of architects, builders, decanting and other costs.**

The total cost of the project in terms of architects, builders, and other costs is £4.13m of which £1.6m was for the decant.

**(3) How much GLA investment has been lost**

There is £9.4m grant allocated to the scheme.

**(4) The impact of the failures and delays in the Altamira project on the Twybridge Way site also in Stonebridge.**

The Twybridge Way site remains an option for the Council to redevelop. The Council is currently reviewing all potential sites to determine the best use and so whilst this review is being completed, Brent Start will continue to operate from this location.

**(5) If, in view of the above, and Altamira's historic importance, the current project will now be aborted and a more sympathetic project which retains the Villa at its heart will now be pursued.**

No decision has been made about the future of the Morland Gardens site.