

Cost-of-Living Support Statement

October 2023

Since late 2021, the UK has experienced a sharp rise in the cost-of-living for individuals and businesses, as the cost of everyday things, including food and energy, increased. For many Brent residents, this meant having to make difficult decisions on how they spend their income, which can have a negative impact on their standard of living.

Context

The cost-of-living crisis is affecting everyone in Brent, with residents and communities with the most complex needs being hit the hardest. In our residents' attitude survey, one in five people stated their finances will get worse over the next year. We expect greater demand for our support as energy costs and use of foodbanks continues to increase. The crisis is affecting everyone - a recent attitudes survey¹ found that of those Londoners surveyed, a fifth were struggling due to the rising cost of living, with over half of those surveyed having to spend less on non-essentials and buying cheaper products.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, we learnt a lot, and we want to put that learning into practice. We listened to what our residents and people who work, study or do business in Brent said was important, and took your feedback.

Priorities

Our Moving Brent Forward Together Borough Plan for 2023-2027² sets out how we will work with residents, partner organisations and voluntary organisations over the next four years, and what the council will focus on.

There are five priority areas:

- Prosperity and Stability in Brent
- A Cleaner, Greener Future
- Thriving Communities
- The Best Start in Life
- A Healthier Brent

We will continue supporting our residents and businesses through the cost-of-living crisis and to recover from the pandemic, by continuing to work with partners and building on our existing joint plans to reduce poverty. We want to ensure everyone has access to direct support when they need it – whether it be financial, digital, welfare centred advice or for employment. This is also about making sure our residents and communities with more complex needs receive the best possible support. To enable this, we will continue our progress to be a Digital Place and Digital Council that make it easier for residents to access support and for us all to interact.

If you are struggling with rising costs or just about getting by, [our Cost-of-Living Advice Hub](#) lists all support Brent Council has available, to help with:

- Energy and water bills
- Money and debt
- Food and household essentials
- Childcare and school costs
- Help if you are facing homelessness.
- Jobs and training

Visit:

www.brent.gov.uk/cost-of-living-help-and-advice

¹ Source: YouGov (for GLA). Sample size: 1097 adults. Fieldwork undertaken between 15th and 20th September 2023. Figures have been weighted and are representative of all London adults (aged 18+).

² Moving Brent Forward Together for 2023-2027 Borough Plan. Available to read [here](#). You can also download an accessible version of the borough plan [here](#).

Support with money and debt

Our key activities in this area include:

- A focal point of the Council's approach to supporting residents who are experiencing financial hardship is our network of Brent Hubs and the Resident Support team within Customer Access. The Hubs team is well embedded within our communities and situated across seven locations in the borough. The Resident Support team considers RSF applications and makes awards.
- The Brent **Resident Support Fund (RSF)** is a discretionary support fund available to Brent residents who are in financial difficulties, for example struggling with food, utility bills and other household essentials.
- If you are unemployed, on a low income or claiming benefits, you may be eligible for **Housing Benefit** to help you pay your rent.
 - If you are facing financial difficulties and need help paying your rent and household costs, we may be able to help you with a short term, one-off **Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP)**.
- **Council Tax support** is available for Brent residents needing help with paying their Council Tax.
 - Single persons, students, apprentices, carers, people with disabilities, people in detention, hospital or care home residents, and care leavers may also be eligible for a **Council Tax discount or reduction**.
- We have also improved access to free, regulated debt advice across our network of Brent Hubs.

Support with energy and water bills

Our key activities in this area include:

- Our dedicated **Resident Support Fund** can help eligible residents with emergency financial support towards things like their energy bills.
- Our **Brent Hubs** are based across seven locations in the borough and provide emergency support for residents in urgent need including food and fuel vouchers. Visit www.brenthubs.com
- The Brent **Well and Warm** Scheme is available to support vulnerable residents with free consultations and specialist energy advice to keep their homes warm over the winter period and beyond.
- If you are in arrears on your utility bills, you may be eligible for a 60-day 'Breathing Space', during which your creditors can't add interest or fees to your debts, or take enforcement action.

Support with food and household essentials

Our key activities in this area include:

- Our **Brent Hubs**, located across the borough, provide emergency support for residents in urgent need, including food and fuel vouchers. Visit www.brenthubs.com.
- Free vitamins are available to all pregnant women and children under the age of 4, available to collect from our Family Wellbeing Centres.
- If you are in extreme financial hardship and do not currently have access to the internet or a digital device, you may be eligible for a free **digital package** through our Resident Support Fund.

Support with employment and training

Our key activities in this area include:

- The **Brent Start** programme provides adult education services across the borough including digital skills and ESOL, from a number of locations including libraries, community centres, primary schools and children centres. If you are on a low income and want to explore employment and training options, the Brent Start Adult Education Service Discretionary Learner Support Fund (DLSF) may be available to you.
- Our borough-wide **Brent Works** service provides job and apprenticeship opportunities, advice and support. For more information, visit <https://brentworks.brent.gov.uk/>
- Wrap-around support to help residents to access employment, skills and other linked support (e.g. financial inclusion and health) is available through **Brent Hubs**.
- Brent Council is currently undertaking an **Employment and Skills Outcomes Based Review (OBR)**, to explore further opportunities around employment and skills.

Help if you are facing homelessness

If you are homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless, the following support is available:

- If your landlord is harassing you, trying to unlawfully evict you or refusing to carry out essential repairs, The **London Borough of Brent Tenancy Relation Service (BTRS)**, can provide support and advice Contact brenttrs@hja.net
- If you face the threat of homelessness in the next few weeks or are currently homeless and require emergency accommodation, complete our online **housing needs assessment** to receive further information on the options available to you.
- Other options are available for older and vulnerable people, care leavers, people fleeing domestic abuse or violence and those leaving the armed forces, prison, a hospital or a gang. Visit www.brent.gov.uk/cost-of-living-help-and-advice
- If you are single and at risk of homelessness, you can visit **The Turning Point** located in the Design Works, Park Parade, NW10 4HT for support with your housing needs.

Support with childcare and school costs

Our key activities in this area include:

- Our **Family Wellbeing Centres** offer a wide range of free health, education and welfare sessions and services to families and aim to give everyone in Brent the best possible start in life.
- Support is available through the **Resident Support Fund** if you are a Brent resident and in financial difficulty. The fund may be able to help with the costs of bills and essentials, including school uniforms.
- There are a range of schemes available to support with childcare and early education. Visit: <https://www.brent.gov.uk/children-young-people-and-families/childcare-and-early->

The Brent Offer

The Brent Offer is very much a partnership approach, particularly with our valued voluntary and community sector. This multi-agency approach ensures there is something for everyone who is experiencing financial hardship and seeks to guarantee that specialist services are available for those who need more help and support. Our range of services includes:

- applications, apprenticeships, course referrals, volunteering
- General support / form filling – support with reading letters and completing forms (e.g. medical appointments, MyAccount and digital support, universal credit, oyster card, freedom pass, driving license, blue badge forms, registering to vote and passport forms)
- Food and fuel aid– support in accessing food and fuel vouchers, referrals to food banks

Visit: www.brent.gov.uk/your-community/brent-hubs

Resident Support Fund

Financial Assistance is available for Brent residents who have experienced a crisis, emergency and are in extreme financial hardship through the Resident Support Fund (RSF). A grant from this fund can help with reduced household income, increased household costs or arrears with rent, mortgage or council tax and/or debt. Grant packages in the form of digital packages are available to residents who are unable to access the internet.

Visit: <https://www.brent.gov.uk/benefits-and-money-advice/resident-support-fund#howtoapplyrsf>

Brent Hubs



The Brent Hubs are a borough-wide service operating from seven locations across the borough: Harlesden, Kilburn, Willesden, Wembley, Kingsbury, the Civic Centre and The Living Room. The service offer was developed in partnership with local groups and organisations. Brent Hubs bring together local partners in one place to provide holistic support alongside key council services. The core service offer includes:

Benefits – housing benefits and council tax support, overpayment of benefits, change in circumstances, enquiries about JSA, ESA, Universal Credit processes, financial inclusion advice relating to benefits

- Housing and homelessness – rent arrears, facing eviction, repairs (relating to housing management), problems with landlords, moving home, sheltered accommodation enquires
- Money – debt, rent arrears, budget management, financial inclusion support
- Employment – support with setting up an email account, job search, CV writing, job

Family Wellbeing Centres



In December 2020, Brent opened eight new Family Wellbeing Centres, developed from existing Children's Centre venues around Brent. Family Wellbeing Centres provide a wide range of easily accessible support for families. Their core offer of support includes health, education, family support, support for parents/carers and SEND support.

Both Brent Hubs and the council's Family Wellbeing Centres are aligned with a localities approach. Both aim to build on and connect with local community assets (including organisations and groups), helping their clients to access the right services and support for them. The approach enables us to address complex issues that exist at a local level by tailoring approaches to meet local needs, and to work with communities to make them more engaged, connected and resilient. The key shift in this approach is a move from focusing on single services to address specific issues (which often results in complex systems, which are challenging to navigate) to a more joined-up, issues approach relevant to needs and locations.

Visit: www.brent.gov.uk/services-for-residents/children-and-family-support/childcare/familywellbeing-centres

Foodbanks

The Council recognises the vital role that foodbanks play in the borough, particularly in challenging times. Whilst recognising this role the council is also keen to reduce foodbank dependency. During the pandemic, foodbanks

in the borough saw an increase in demand and the Council has worked closely with the Food Aid Network to share information, provide access to funding and ensure links are made with other services such as Brent Hubs.

Alongside food aid, foodbanks have been providing welfare advice to those in crisis. To reduce the dependency on foodbanks as well as support the types of food on offer, initiatives which support growing local produce are in place and work well in the borough. These include community gardens - Harlesden community gardens and Sufra/St. Raphael's community garden. Brent Hubs make referrals to foodbanks and provide an outreach service in food bank locations. Mutual Aid groups also make referrals. Foodbanks play a pivotal role in improving the health and wellbeing of residents. Their role is wider than food distribution and there are particular opportunities to support those with long-term conditions and ensure that the wider population are signposted to health services when they use foodbanks.

Visit: <https://www.brentfoodaidnetwork.co.uk/>

Ethical Debt Recovery policy and Breathing Space Legislation

The Ethical Debt Recovery policy and the debt write off policy procedure ensure that no resident is left with multiple debts that they find difficult to manage and that as a Council we take every step to support the residents with payments and proper recovery procedures. In addition, the new Breathing Space legislation that came into effect on 4 May 2021 will impact the way in which service areas across the council can collect income and debt. Residents with existing debt from 4 May 2021 will be able to apply for 'Breathing Space'. If granted, the individual will then be given a 60-day 'Breathing Space' period, during which all recovery and enforcement action is halted while they receive professional debt advice to find solutions to their financial difficulties.

Cost of Living Outcomes Based Review

In 2022, Brent Council carried out a Cost-of-Living focussed Outcomes Based Review (OBR). The OBR aimed to develop tailored solutions to best support our residents through the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. OBR's

constitute working with various stakeholders and residents, using design-led methodologies, across four phases: Discover, Define, Develop and Deliver. From this process, several pilot projects emerged which have been in development and testing, including our Community Wellbeing Project in Stonebridge.

The Community Wellbeing Project pilot is a partnership with local charity Sufra NW London, aiming to tackle food insecurity, increase community resilience and provide wraparound services to support our residents in the longer-term.

Visit: www.bit.ly/sufracwp

A Healthier Brent

The pandemic highlighted health inequalities that exist in our communities. We know there are a range of underlying factors such as housing, employment and income that contribute to these inequalities. We want Brent to be a healthier and stronger borough where everyone can live independent, safe and happy lives. We can do this by supporting the most vulnerable and removing barriers all residents face to becoming physically active and we will do so by focusing on tackling health inequalities, and providing localised services for local needs.

We provide opportunities for residents to be more active and working with local community groups and leaders. Public Health have over 80 sessions each week that residents can access free of charge.

Public Health/Brent Health Matters also work with local communities to provide Health and Wellbeing events where a wide range of information on health and wellbeing is offered, with access to local services such as health checks and healthy eating advice.

Public Health have also worked with health and community partners to offer local services to the community such as health checks, oral health checks, vaccinations (flu, Covid), prostate cancer checks, diabetes risk assessment, healthy eating and more.

Useful links:

- For Parks, Leisure and Healthier Living, Open Spaces, Sports Clubs and Activities, FREE to use Outdoor Gyms, and B.Active discount leisure

card, visit: <https://www.brent.gov.uk/parks-leisure-and-healthy-living>

- Mental Health and Wellbeing:
<https://www.brent.gov.uk/adult-social-care/health-and-wellbeing/promoting-mental-wellbeing>
- Healthy Start – get help with buying healthy food, milk and vitamins:
<https://www.brent.gov.uk/children-young-people-and-families/support-for-parents-and-families/start-for-life/healthy-start>

Men's health programmes:

- Men's **wellbeing gardening programme**, on Sundays from 2-4pm at Longstone Avenue allotments (opposite Roundwood Park).
 - For men of all ages
 - No gardening experience necessary
 - No booking necessary, just turn up!
- Men United - Wellbeing Group, on Wednesdays between 1-3pm at the Methodist Church, 25 High Street, Harlesden, NW10 4NE
 - Free tea, coffee, light lunch, advice and support as well as barber services once a month.

Digital Inclusion

Since 2020 we have supported over 2000 residents with digital devices and connectivity as part of the Digital Resident Support Fund which continues to be available to all residents in Brent who do not have access to digital technology and internet at home. Alongside this, we have nearly 200 digital champions across Brent's frontline services to support residents with answering their digital questions and helping them to get online. We also understand that affordability is a significant barrier to the internet and actively promote the social tariffs available via our digital champions to ensure the digital world is both accessible and affordable. To ensure that we continue to meet the changing digital needs of residents we actively engage with the community and voluntary sector via our digital inclusion network and will be launching a resident survey later this year.

Improving intelligence

Measuring impact will improve the Council's understanding of the effects of the crisis on the borough and will shape how effective collective efforts are in helping to mitigate any negative impacts. The main mechanism for measuring impact is a Financial Inclusion Dashboard developed by Brent. The Council continues to develop and build on the dashboard, to support with making targeted decisions in mitigating the effects of the cost-of-living crisis.

Brent Start



Brent Start is Brent's adult education college, providing adult education services across the borough. Brent start can support you with learning new skills, getting into employment, finding a better job or improving your prospects, and offer a range of courses including digital skills and ESOL. The programme operates from a number of locations including libraries, community centres, primary schools and children centres.

Visit: www.brent.gov.uk/jobs-training-and-skills/courses-training-and-skills

Brent Works



Our borough-wide **Brent Works** service provides job and apprenticeship opportunities as well as employment related advice and support. For all opportunities and information, visit: <https://brentworks.brent.gov.uk/>

Employment and Skills OBR

Brent Council is undertaking an Employment and Skills themed Outcomes Based Review, aimed at exploring how we can best upskill and enable residents to best support themselves through employment. Findings from the OBR and other ongoing Cost-of-Living related work will inform our future support offer, to ensure we are supporting residents towards sustainable, longer-term outcomes.

Translation

If you need help translating the support available into another language, visit:

<https://www.brent.gov.uk/cost-of-living-help-and-advice>

and use the orange 'SPEAK' button at the top of the page, to change the language of the website.

