

## Brent Mencap Feedback on Brent Council Proposed Budget 2024-5



### **Priorities and feedback from our Social Prescribing and Health and Well Being Coaching team (who last year supported over 15000 patients in Brent )**

The proposed 4.9% increase in council tax will seriously affect some residents. We have a lot more people coming to us who are working but due to cost-of-living crisis are already on the breadline - falling into debt, having to access food banks etc, therefore this planned increase will push them further into debt and poverty so for our patients this drastic increase will have a negative effect on their life and will also go onto impacting their mental health, pushing more children into poverty etc.

The plan to close Millennium day centre, although this may not impact directly on a lot of SPLW patients it will have a significant impact on patients with a LD and others and their carers- often elderly and vulnerable themselves who really value the regular respite.

The team identified other gaps in services:

- Day centres- not enough low-cost ones for elderly/vulnerable residents.
- Meals on wheels- no free or subsidised service
- Floating support for elderly patients- find it difficult to access other services, especially now the Elders Voice service is ending
- Transport for elderly patients
- No Brent Community Law Centre
- No counselling service for DV victims

Please see some relevant case studies

- Elderly pt was struggling at home to cook food, SPLW looked into meals on wheels but could not find any free or heavily subsidised service and due to being on low income and cost of living was not able to afford to pay the cost. SPLW referred to Sufra for hot meals service and community kitchen but is trying to find an alternative for the winter months as patient does not feel steady walking due to slipping on wet leaves.
- Pt attended as they have fallen into debt due to cost of living crisis (bills and shopping increase), pt was very upset as they were working but really struggling and having to skip meals to ensure their children were eating. SPLW referred to IAPT for their mental well-being, food banks for support with food, green doctors to support with energy bills while also applying for RSF to help with incurred debts. Although they had temporary food parcels and some debt cleared their mental well-being is still impacted as they feel their financial situation will not improve due to every increasing costs.
- Team member reported that they have been trying to get through to the assigned housing officer both via email and phone for one of their patients for a couple of months now, but they have received no response. Team member tried contacting customer services to confirm if this officer is still assigned to the patient's case and if there is anyone else they can discuss the case with, but unfortunately they never received a response. Team member stated they feel it's very difficult to make any progress with these cases as the communication with the council is not very good since they often have to chase up housing officers and other relevant professionals within the council which slows down their work.
- Team member reported they find it difficult to support their patients who need help with form filling since there are not many services within Brent that help with completing forms such as PIP and Attendance Allowance free of charge. Those services that provide such support require their vulnerable patients to queue for hours, in some cases without even being seen that day.

Team member reported one such occasion with a vulnerable elderly patient who waited for over 4 hours only to be told they should come the next day.

1. Not enough form filling services available in Brent. CAB is difficult to get through to and feedback on Brent hubs is not always positive - patient tell us they don't always get help they need.
2. We are getting more and more people referred to us who are struggling with their mental health, and they can't always access the services and support needed in Brent- Long waiting times, specific eligibility criteria etc.
3. More access to free services should be available
4. Need more services to support those affected by cost-of-living crisis.
5. Better communication from LBB staff related to housing etc— Team is getting delayed or no response from Brent council departments, such as housing team, social services, and SG team. Even if they action something, we are not informed /they do not reply to emails, so we don't know what's been done and can't update the patient.

### **Brent Mencap's priorities**

- A dedicated form filling service with a clear service spec, clear criteria, regular opening hours with sufficient skilled staff
- A strategic plan to develop respect for and co-production with voluntary sector partners.
- Better more timely and accessible engagement with the voluntary sector and our users which includes officers getting and using evidence from the grant monitoring reports we provide.
- Better funding and spec for floating support services for vulnerable residents- a flexible, person-centred services that doesn't just offer 45 minutes support a week regardless of need.
- A proper strategic plan with resources that commits the Council to fully meet the Accessible Information Standard Regulations (which has been a legal obligation for 6 years) and in the interim, a guarantee that an accessible/ easy-read version of all key documents and leaflets is sent out with other documents to users of health and social care services as minimum .
- Longer term grant funding for the voluntary sector
- A reduction in the use of complicated tender processes for services that the Voluntary sector could deliver.

### **Brent Mencap Organisational Challenges**

- The general lack of respect, understanding and recognition shown by Brent Council and the ICP to the income generated, services provided, and contribution made by the Voluntary sector in Brent to the wellbeing and health of Brent people of all ages.
- Not being treated as equal, knowledgeable partners by the above and not having the voices, wishes and experiences of the people we support heard and acknowledged.
- Gaining long term charitable funding for specialist creative, wellbeing and self-advocacy activities and support for people with a learning disability and other long term health conditions
- Recruiting new local staff through an apprenticeship scheme
- Reducing our energy costs in our building and other green initiatives
- Understanding how AI could improve Brent Mencap and the support and advice we provide.

### **Brent Mencap's experience of poverty/cost of living on service users/residents in Brent.**

### **Feedback from Social Prescribing and Health and Well Being Coaching team.**

1. Increased number of referrals about mental health issues due to worries about cost-of-living.
2. Increase in food bank /food voucher referrals.
3. Increase in referrals applying for resident support fund.
4. Increase in discretionary housing benefits applications.
5. 30%increase in patients citing housing issues overall compared to 22-23. (Homelessness, housing repairs, adaptations, housing applications)

## **Brent Mencap Areas of concern in the draft budget proposals, and why**

Brent Mencaps initial views on the draft budget proposals and impact they are likely to have on our service users/residents, if any. **Please note our comments are based on original proposals sent out where some numbers were duplicated hence, we include proposal title to be clear.**

There has been no report outlining a cumulative equality assessment of budget decisions since 2018 that I've seen. Is it happening?

### **Re current cuts proposals not all indicate need for an EIA where we believe one should be done eg**

Proposal CYP0 could affect children and people with a disability but no EIA is indicated-why? A cut could affect children and young people from BAME backgrounds or SEND children

Similarly, CYP5 and CYP6 could affect children from all communities and possibly children with a disability /parents with a LD and should have EIAs as core offer may not be appropriate for some

Also, FR02 needs an EIA as possible many current tenants are BAME community groups

Selling bed spaces at Ade Adipitan centre to other boroughs could restrict bed availability for Brent children who needs emergency respite- needs an EIA for that

CYP04 re willow nursery provides some specialist support to children and possibly parents with LD so should have an EIA.

#### **CHW01 Technology enabled Care Transformation**

- This should have an EIA.
- What if any discussion has been had with partners about this- feels like it will just be imposed on people by some outside consultants who don't know Brent people, no existing draft scope yet. It mentions prevention but no detail given. What internal work has already been done re cultural change? Are staff ready? No consideration given re non digital people likely to be affected or family carers and stress faced.
- There is currently no Brent Council Engagement strategy, so what process will they follow? This will need early engagement and co-production following the Accessible information Standards (AIS) regulations to meet users with visual and hearing impairments and those with a LD identified communication wishes and needs. Hence need for EIA.

#### **CHW02 Managing demand at the front door, prevention, and early intervention.**

- Very vague about numbers likely to be affected, but there is already not enough advice and information services in Brent to signpost people to (see feedback from social prescribing team above), and people can't continually be referred to the voluntary sector by Council where there are not enough resources in that sector either.
- Brent Residents won't understand any explanations given about not being eligible for Care Act support when they ask for help.

#### **CWH03 Continuing sustainable, long-term care and support.**

- Theory may sound good but if people have had support for a long time, any changes will cause users and carers anxiety and stress. No clear figures about amount of people likely to be affected.
- Many users and their carers find managing Direct payments is hard and the amount paid per hour under DPs isn't enough to recruit and train skilled and experienced support workers. People do not have to accept a DP if offered.
- Any consultation and reviews with users must follow the AIS regulations, should meet their identified communication needs and people should not be rushed into a decision.

## **CW01 Reduction in Building Based services i.e., Millennium**

### **Feedback from self-advocates at Brent Mencap (people with a learning disability)**

1. The council took a very long time to answer the questions we asked last year. Why so slow?
2. We have really enjoyed using the Kiln at the Millennium day centre and meeting some of the clients from Tudor Gardens there. They are worried for them if it closes. What will they do?
3. We think it's a shame if the kiln isn't available in future as we love ceramics there.
4. The council never come and ask our views on things, so how will they listen to what people affected by this think about changes?
5. We don't understand how the Council will actually develop any new services with partners and the community. Who will they involve to do this?

### **Brent Mencap feedback**

- Some people have been at Millennium for a long time or transferred from other closed services.
- People value seeing their friends, known staff. How will they see friends after?
- The quality of external day services is not great. One carer likely to be affected said, "I don't want my son to spend 2 hours sitting in McDonald's at Wembley Asda".
- There is little or no experience of really co-designing new services in Brent.
- There are no specialist employment support services for people with a LD in Brent . Shaw trust may be good with other groups but have no expertise with people with a LD.
- Timescale is very short won't allow for proper person-centred reviews and consultation following the AIS regulations.
- Not clear what if any advocacy support will be provided to current users to ensure their voice is heard.
- **CHW02 Housing related support.**

This amounts to a 17% cut to a service which prevents vulnerable people needing ASC support, being abused, needing other support or ending up in the criminal justice system.

- **RSO8 "Less people and more emphasis on digital self-service"** idea fails to recognise the needs of people who have a learning disability, other visual or hearing impairments, few digital skills or confidence, people whose first language is not English or those with poor literacy skills.
- **The cutting of the volunteer platform** because of low take up and poor performance raises questions about why it was commissioned , not contract managed robustly and wasted money could have been given to vol sector to support residents in other ways.
- **FR01 Increase in car parking charges** will reduce vol sector ability to afford to participate in community events or meetings if materials or users are needed to be transported there to participate .
- **FR02 and GO6 Market rent proposal/solicitor cut** may affect smaller vol sector groups used to a lower rent or who want a cheap community space. From our organisational experience of going through the process of agreeing a lease with Brent Council and the time and effort it takes, it will be a long time before the income is achieved, especially with the other planned reduction of 1 solicitor elsewhere in the cuts.
- **GO1 Reduction to training for councillors and senior staff.** It's shameful that more imagination wasn't shown to identify other training and development needed by them that could have been delivered by local vol sector groups e.g., Domestic Violence, Accessible information Standards Regulations, Carers Rights, Learning disability awareness etc.

On behalf of Brent Mencap users, staff and Trustees

Ann O'Neill, Executive Director 28/11/2023

## **Crisis work in Brent**

Crisis has been operating in Brent since 2018, following its merger with a small local charity Lift People, which routes in Brent went back to 2005. Earlier in the year, the service relocated to a new and much improved building at the heart of Harlesden. Consequently, self-referrals increased as result of greater visibility.

Alongside direct service delivery to people who are faced with homelessness, Crisis Brent also deliver a varied programme of activities aimed at strengthening local responses to homelessness – under the Ending Homelessness in Brent partnership.

**Homelessness in Brent** - CHAIN data from 2022-23 shows 373 people were seen rough sleeping in the borough. This represents a 32% increase when compared to the previous year. In August 23 62 people were seen rough sleeping in Brent by the outreach team in comparison with 39 August 22. On average, 40 people per day access the new council Turning Point Service in Brent.

## **Responding to Brent Budget Proposal**

We appreciate the invite by the Budget Scrutiny committee to, once again, submit our feedback on the Budget Proposal.

In developing our response, we have looked at previous Budget Scrutiny Committee Report as well as current proposal and detailed feedback included within this document. There are several key areas that worth highlighting:

- It was encouraging that the recommendations made by the Budget Scrutiny Committee with regards to 2022-2023 budget, have reflected feedback provided by voluntary organisations. However, it was disappointing that those recommendations were not implemented – including around improving Equality Impact Assessment & responding to the challenge of increased costs & risk of sustainability of local groups.
- Overall, budget proposals include additional cuts to key services. There is little evidence, however, within the report to back it up, often in a face of clear trend of increased needs. This raises real concern that this will lead to increased in gatekeeping to key services including ASC & Housing related support.
- There is an assumption that individuals would be directed to voluntary sector to assist in preventing and mitigating demand. However, this is without consultation with the sector and consideration to the investment it would require to ensure its capacity to provide this required support.

## **Comments on Previous Budget Scrutiny Report Jan 23**

Recommendation 5 – Additional Advice & Support for our Voluntary sector partners

- Be interesting to find out if and how council responded to the recommendations as little evidence to support implementation of recommendation to increase value of commissioned contract to reflect cost of living
- There is no collaborative strategy in place
- Policy reg. community assets is still pending – although have been referenced within new proposal

Recommendation 7 – Improving Equality Impact assessment

- Recommendation was not reflected in current year approach as there is no evidence base/ rationale section to support EIA of each proposal (see comments reg. overrepresentation in homelessness and housing needs)

## **Comments reg. Budget Proposal comments – 23 – 26**

### **Page 4 - Managing demand at the front door, prevention, and early intervention.**

- There is lack of evidence to support the proposal. It is not clear, what assumption are made to support the saving. There is a real concern that without grounding the proposal in there is a real risk that the saving would only be achieved through gatekeeping, particular as there is also clear indication that there would be increased pressure on ASC due to population growth. Furthermore, as per recommendation 5 in last year Budget Scrutiny committee report highlighting the need to ensure contract value that safeguards providers, particularly in light of increase in cost of living.

- The proposal is looking to build on voluntary sector in supporting prevention and managing demand but there was no engagement to ascertain Vol. Sector capacity to support proposal. Voluntary sector should have been consulted in advance of developing the proposal.
- Adopting prevention approach often support better outcomes for individuals as well as offering greater value for money. However, there should be clear investment in prevention activities and reallocation of resources to support that. It is not clear that this the approach proposed.
- Our experience is that there is already a need for significant level of advocacy in order to secure care package which can be an indication to likely gatekeeping practice

**Page 7 - Continuing sustainable long-term care and support needs costs that promote independence.**

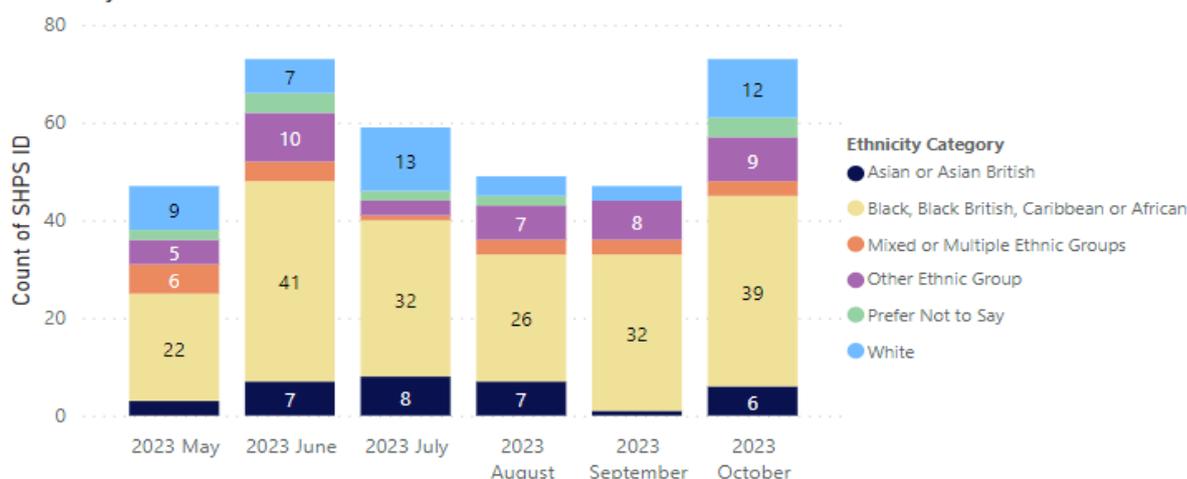
- There is a clear lack of consultation of vol. and community professionals working to support this work

**Page 16 - Review of housing related support contracts and focus on Care Act duties**

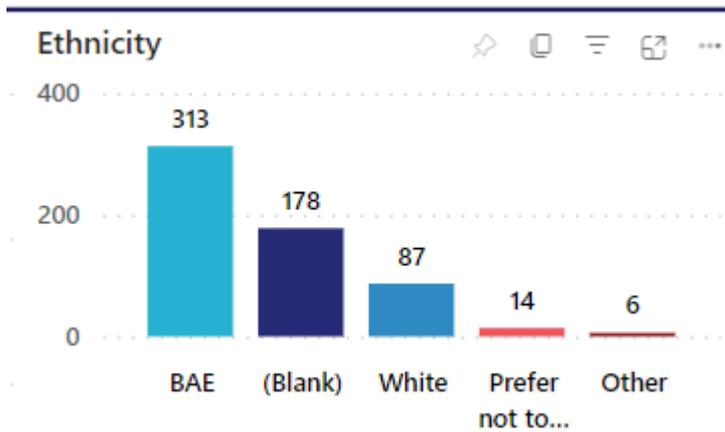
- Lack of evidence to support this. It is not clear how this align with projected increase in homelessness (see details around increased in homelessness see [7. Single Homeless Prevention Service.pdf \(brent.gov.uk\)](#))
- No clear what is the current level of voids in services which would support the proposal. This is information that is not shared and should be available to support recommendation.
- It would be helpful going forward for the voids levels to be tracked and made transparent to ensure this precious resource is properly monitored and utilised.
- It is not clear how reduction in contracts cost will be achieved not only because of local trend of growing population and growing need, but also in ensuring Brent’ commitment to level of contract that reflect London Living Wage and ensure sustainable providers
- Again, it is disappointing to see narrow approach to consultation; for example it would have been helpful to link with the work of the Homelessness Forum and the Ending Homelessness in Brent partnership. It highlights risk of silo working between ASC and Housing and the tokenistic approach to involvement of vol. and community sector
- Reg. Equality impact screening –BAME are over-represented in the homeless population – as well as people from the LGBTQ+ community. The recent report for the Community Well-being Scrutiny committee also backs this point.

Single Homeless Prevention Service – Ethnicity Breakdown

**Ethnicity of Starts over 6 months**



Skylight Crisis Brent – breakdown of people on caseload by ethnicity



### Page 69 - Property Strategy to maximise rental return on council assets

- Should make more prominently the intention of taking social value into account when setting rent level including this being translated to monetary value.
- Might be wise to do an equality assessment to see who is impacted as certain communities might be affected more than others
- Would be wise to flag up the work around the Picture Palace and the Brent asset ... that Brent CVS are leading

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# Sufra NW London Response to Brent Council Budget Consultation, December 2023

Sufra NW London is currently supporting 1,300 people every week with food aid alone – this figure is set to increase in the months ahead. We have never been busier in our 10 year history, and feedback from other organisation in the Brent Food Aid Network (BFAN) is similar.

In Brent, the food aid sector has had limited investment over the years, which has meant that it will continue to struggle to develop the capacity it needs to support residents – especially as demand continues to rise. Most food aid organisations are volunteer led and staff and volunteers are experiencing high rates of burn out. Donation levels are falling and access to surplus food stock is dwindling as supermarkets reduce waste upstream. This leaves a bleak picture for the borough's most disadvantaged residents.

It's clear that the £8m in budget cuts planned will further impact Brent residents negatively. Our team is concerned that council tax increases will push more people in Brent into financial crisis, debt and food poverty, which will increase demand for emergency food aid at a time when food banks are already unable to cope with current levels of demand.

We note that one of the solutions presented in the Budget is to provide more residents with access to food vouchers to food banks. However, we strongly feel that this is not a sustainable solution and not in line with the cash first approach BFAN is advocating for. Food aid is the most limited way to support people in need of financial support. Food banks are hugely complex, inefficient ways to support guests. More info here: <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/cash-first>

Our overall recommendation is to allocate more resources to services that support people in poverty and those in need of food aid. The key is not to rely on food aid as a solution but to invest in the following:

**Advice and Support:** The expansion of Advice Services across the borough, as welfare advisors are best placed to help residents increase their incomes through advice on benefits, housing and support with debts and energy bills. Unfortunately, feedback about Brent Hubs is not always positive. We note that the voluntary sector is well placed to provide advice and support, especially those organisations that are AQS accredited, as well as smaller organisations that work hyper-locally with residents who might not be willing or able to approach to Council Advisors. However, there needs to be more support provided to the voluntary sector to make this a reality in terms of finance and space to operate services. There also needs to be more accredited Debt Advice in Brent and/or support for VCS organisations looking to attain such accreditation. This support needs to extend beyond CAB, which has limited capacity and reach. BAF grants could be reinstated to support this. Brent doesn't have a law center due to a lack of resources. The NW London Law Centre is over-subscribed and Brent residents are not able to access this service sufficiently.

**Meals on Wheels:** There needs to be more support available to elderly and disabled residents who struggle to leave their home to access any form of food aid, especially as Adult Social Care budgets continue to reduce. Again, the voluntary sector could support this process, but only with sufficient resourcing and access to space

**Free School Meals:** The impact of this so far has been significant across London - the return on investment has been calculated to be huge in terms of mental and physical health, social inclusion, family wellbeing,

educational outcomes, and even employment. There is a strong case that this should be expanded to secondary schools and plans should be laid to make this permanent beyond next September. More info here: [The Universal Multiplier | National Education Union \(neu.org.uk\)](https://www.neu.org.uk)

**Investing in the Voluntary Sector.** A relatively small investment here can significantly develop the capacity of communities to support residents experiencing a wide range of vulnerabilities. This is a far more cost-effective way to support residents than spending this money internally on council run services. Investment in the sector will have a multiplier effect and create long term infrastructure, skills and capacity that is currently missing. If done correctly, this is a low-investment, win-win scenario. For example, with access to sufficient office space or cooking facilities, food aid organisations and community groups could provide a huge amount of emergency support to residents, especially over winter months when their bills spike. Access to space to operate is a huge concern to the CVS, given the huge rents being charged. The Bridge Park Community Wellbeing Project is a great example of how the sharing of available resources with trusted partners can support a huge number of people in an innovative way at very little cost to the Council.

**Housing & Asylum Seekers:** Food bank guests are urgently in need of social housing as even affordable rents are not affordable. More homeless shelters are needed to support rough sleepers - numbers are rising and Sufra is often spending significant amounts of money to support guests urgently in need, with the support from the council being slow and not always fit for purpose - poor communication and long delays. Families are often housed inappropriately in a single room, with a lack of amenities - such as a kitchen - which places additional cost pressures on families. The 7-day eviction notice when asylum seekers are granted refugee status is not sufficient time to find suitable accommodation and they can often end up on the street. More resources are urgently needed to support this demographic with the transition. With the removal of HMO licenses, more must be done to guarantee accommodation standards for asylum seekers in Brent.

**Household Support Fund:** The continuation and expansion of the Household Support Fund will be essential beyond March 2024, as this provides a lifeline to families struggling to make ends meet.

## **Brent FOE response to the Draft Budget 2024-6**

Following the stakeholders meeting on Brent Council's Draft Budget 2024-6 on 30<sup>th</sup> Nov, the following is a report on our concerns, as requested by 5<sup>th</sup> Jan 2024.

### **Draft Budget 2024/5 & 2025/6**

We are concerned that the Draft Budget paper provides a considered context which mentions inflation, economic turmoil, the effects of the cost-of-living crisis, the impact of Brexit etc but makes no mention of the Climate Ecological Emergency (4.2).

It also states (18) that "There are no climate change and environmental considerations arising out of this report". This is despite the clear limitations placed on the council's response to the Climate Emergency by their current financial situation, as well as the specific budget saving proposals with environmental impacts. See below.

We know that the council recognises the Climate and Ecological Emergency, but are very concerned by what these omissions imply - that it is not treating this situation as an emergency, or prioritising consideration of how to respond.

### **Appendix B - Budget Savings Proposals**

We have significant concerns about the following proposals to make savings.

p128 "To increase the annual subscription price for garden waste collections from £60 to £65, an 8% increase to generate an additional income of £100,000".

The concerns are that more users are put off using the service (which is free in some London boroughs) and are discouraged from gardening, which is an important way that people can individually care for the environment and improve biodiversity. Also that (as identified) this leads to an increase in fly tipping at a time that street cleaning has already been reduced.

p130 "A programme of organised cultural and entertainment events to be organised in parks to generate a new income for the service. This can be supported by a review of existing fees and charges".

As stated, a key risk is that more events will "impact the natural fabric of the park". More commercial events in parks will also reduce access to green space in a borough that is already lacking in green space, with attending health impacts for all. Already in Brent 80% of people live in neighbourhoods deprived of green space. <https://groups.friendsoftheearth.uk/near-you/local-authority/brent#nature>

We understand that there is an existing problem of community groups/voluntary organisations being charged rates for running events in parks that they find difficult to meet. This is likely to be exacerbated by competition with commercial providers.

p132 "Rental of Parks' building space".

Parks are public spaces and the more the commercial use of buildings is encouraged, the less accessible they are to potential community initiatives which encourage people of all generations to be more connected to and benefit from the nature that is available in their neighbourhoods.

p134 "Licensing / sponsorship schemes in Parks"

The marketing of commercial advertising within parks will, again, reduce people's access to and enjoyment of these important nature filled public spaces. We do not go to parks to be bombarded with more advertising, rather to escape and appreciate nature. As well as "visually intrusive" we would describe this as "psychologically intrusive".

We would like serious consideration to be given to these concerns at a time of a Climate and Ecological Emergency in Brent.

Yours sincerely, Elaine Sheppard

Brent Friends of the Earth Joint Co-ordinator