

# Brent Conservative Group Amendments to the Council's Proposed Budget 2024/25

*Investing in our Towns and Communities  
for a cleaner, greener, safer, fairer, and  
healthier Brent*

# Brent Conservatives Amendments to the Council Budget 2024/2025

## INTRODUCTION

Brent Conservative Councillors are the main opposition in Brent Council. In our role of opposition, we hold the Labour administration to account, and we aspire to do better as a borough. We too want Brent to transform as a Council and be a wonderful place to live and work.

We are not endorsing Labour's financial blueprint for Brent or accepting assumptions and decisions built into their budget. However, we present these amendments and some suggestions to the proposed Budget so that residents pay less taxes and get better services and value for money.

The majority of Councils in England are facing challenges, as we do in Brent. The Conservative Government announced a £64 billion funding package to local governments that is £4 billion more compared to 2023-2024 to local councils in England. This is a 6.5% increase in the Local Government financial settlement, Brent received £126.7 million, an increase of 6 million over the previous year.

Our government's recent record provided more good news for households, November marked the first time in two years that food and non-alcoholic drink prices were lower than the previous month. A surprise fall in inflation in November has raised hopes that the Bank of England will begin cutting interest rates sooner than expected. Inflation - the rate prices rise at - fell from 4.6% to 3.9% in November and to 4.0% in January 2024 the lowest for more than two years. People will keep more of what they earn to provide for their families, do the things they love or invest in their future.

## Exciting News from the Autumn Statement!

More good news which Labour Administration will shrug off, but the 2023 Autumn Statement marked a major milestone as we gear up for a decade of growth and this Conservative Government unveiled the BIGGEST PACKAGE OF TAX CUTS since the 1980s. Brent residents are already benefiting as can be seen below.

### Here's a snapshot of the key highlights:

**✂ Tax Cuts for Working People:** 27 million working individuals have seen a boost in January 2024. A cut in the main rate of National Insurance Contributions of 2%, meaning a £450 tax cut for the average worker earning £35,000.

**✂ Supporting the Self-Employed:** 2 million self-employed individuals will enjoy simplified taxes, abolishing a NICs class and reducing the top rate from 9% to 8%, with an average saving of £350 for those earning £28,000.

**✂ Business Tax Cuts:** A whopping £11 billion cut in business taxes—the largest in modern British history—allowing businesses to invest more and offset their tax bills.

**☑ Debt Reduction:** On track to meet fiscal rules with debt forecasted to decrease as a share of the economy a year ahead of schedule.

**✂ Boosting the National Living Wage:** Elevating it to a record £11.44 per hour, a 9.8% increase benefiting 2.7 million workers. The Conservative Group have fresh ideas which benefit all residents across the borough.

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 **Support for Vulnerable Families:** An average income boost of £800 increased Local Housing Allowance for 1.6 million struggling families.

 **Support for Childcare Helping Families Thrive:** A new childcare package providing access to 30 hours of free childcare a week for working busy parents with children between 9 months and 4 years.

 **Pension Boost:** Pensions up by 8.5% in line with the Triple Lock, ensuring dignity in older age, a boost to millions of pensioners.

 **Freezing Alcohol Duty:** Duty on a pint in a Pub is cheaper than in our Supermarkets as a result following a radical overhaul of how alcohol is taxed. Alleviating pressure on the hospitality sector.

 **Benefits Increase:** A 6.7% increase in all working-age benefits, supporting around 5.5 million households receiving Universal Credit.

**The above measures are steps taken by the Conservative Government in tackling long-term economic challenges and Cost of Living, building a dynamic economy, and bringing prosperity to the entire United Kingdom!**

This Conservative group budget amendment puts forward an alternative which invests in our towns, protects our beautiful greenbelt for future generations and delivers on the priorities of residents, ending a culture of waste at the Civic Centre.

Nationally, Labour is still a party of protest, not of government. Brent Labour administration cries “Tory cuts of £210million” without fail over 13 years, careful study of the annual published budgets shows in fact, we get a small increase. And let’s remind ourselves that the National budget deficit skyrocketed to £103bn by 2010 when Labour left office. Since Conservatives took office in 2010 the deficit has steadily declined to £87.40 million even after the pandemic and the Ukraine war spending. As expected of this Labour administration they quote the ‘Shortfall’ of £210million but fail to tell us how much they receive in grants, benefits, and other income like business rates that they now keep, funny that. The country must live within it means, so should Brent Council.

Let’s not forget we have had the world’s worse pandemic in living memory, measures costing this Government between £310 billion to £410 billion. This Conservative Government gave Brent £40m to cope with the challenge, £20m was used for the actual pandemic and the balance was used after the pandemic as ‘legacy’ projects. Brent Council did not use any of its reserves for such a horrendous pandemic.

**Local authorities have three main sources of revenue:**

**Government grants** – £87.2 million core grants from central government for local services.

**Council tax** – a property tax levied on residential properties.

**Business rates** – a property tax levied on business premises, of which Brent retains 30%.

### Council Tax

The Labour party takes all the credit for the good things happening in Brent, taking funds from

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Central Government to run Council services for residents but, if there's anything they cannot do, they scream "Tory cuts". Potholes and fly-tipping in Brent are blamed on the Government. For over a decade, during which the Labour Party has controlled Brent, they blamed the Conservatives for every reverse and decline but not themselves.

**The Conservative Group is proposing a council tax of 3.99% made up of Council tax 1.99% and Adult Social Care precept of 2% which will be ringfenced for Adult Social Care which is the right thing to do. This will mean a Council tax rate increase on Band D properties for 2024/25 of £1,549.80. This is the Brent element only and excludes the GLA precept.** The Labour Administration over the years has taxed and taxed residents. The Mayor of London Sadiq Khan has no regard for hard-working Londoners and is going to raise his council tax by 8.6% - twice the rate of inflation. This means he has raised his council tax precept by a whopping 71% since 2016. This year it equates to over £470 pounds at Band D.

The Conservative Group believe the Council needs to do more to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour across the borough to keep our streets safe by installing mobile CCTV cameras in crime hotspots across the borough.

We note that Sadiq Khan has once again increased his Precept and yet knife crime and violent attacks, especially on women, have increased. Under Sadiq Khan's London we see Robbery up 49%, Sexual Offences up 53% and Thefts up 21%.

Keeping us safe is London Mayor Sadiq Khan's responsibility. Our message to him is to 'wake up' and show political leadership over soaring crime in London once known as one of the world's safest cities. Mayor Sadiq Khan needs to stop blaming everyone else. Help make Brent a safer borough.

The Conservative Group would like it noted and brought to the residents' attention that while other Councils in the country give around £6 million in council tax discounts to eligible households, in Brent Council we know that discounts and exemptions amounts **to £32 million to more than 26,000 households which equals 5.5 times the national average.** We clearly need to look at this difference to see why this is the case in Brent. Any savings derived from this area could be used to fund other needy services or even cut our Council Tax further rather than any increase. We propose that Brent Council scrutinise the exemptions to reduce the burden on Council finances.

## Council Tax discounts and exemptions

### Single Person Council Tax Discount

The Conservative Group notes that Brent Council seriously needs to look at the single person's discount as through scrutiny we note that the system is abused. The culprits make fraudulent claims and recent internal audits found that fraudsters are misrepresenting their household composition to Brent Council or failing to inform the council when their circumstances change. If found to be true, this would be a substantial saving to Brent Council's revenue. We recognise that most residents claiming the Single Person Discount are doing so legitimately but council investigators need to do more to root out those who wrongly reckon they can cheat the system and get away with it.

The fact is a person aged 18 or over living in a property may be entitled to a single Person discount, which qualifies the person to **25%** off their council tax bill. Brent has a NEC Software solution in place, but it is not utilised fully. Other councils like Aberdeenshire and Staffordshire Councils generated £2 million from the review. Additionally, Internal Audit has made management aware that there was an absence of a joint approach between the **Benefits team overpayments and the**

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**Finance team** for undertaking more reconciliations and robust checks. These variances result in housing benefits overpayment discrepancies, which results in huge to resident Council Tax. **We can ill afford to have a lack of control within the Housing Benefit Team and Finance Team where discrepancies have been found.** The Council cannot go to Brent residents year on year to ask them to pay more in local taxes.

The Conservative Group want the Brent Labour Administration to get a grip on the mismanagement in Council Tax, Benefits and Housing Benefit. This has to stop. There is a cost-of-living crisis which is being exacerbated by these enormous Council Tax hikes. The Labour Administration is asking residents to give, give, give. Enough is enough!

### Housing

**The council is currently spending approximately £50m a year on around 2000 residents in homelessness need and accommodation. A large amount for a small percentage of residents.**

The 2021 Census provides an estimate of the number of unoccupied homes in Brent as of March 2021 (7.4% of dwellings - 9,425 in number). **The census figure is more than three times higher than the administrative count of empty homes sourced from the Council Tax Base.** In Brent as of 31<sup>st</sup> December 2023 recorded shows 3135 empty properties, this is three times less than on the 2021 census. There have been **1604** properties empty for under 2 years, **219** properties between 2-5 years at 100% premium, **47** properties have been emptied between 5-10 years at 200% premium and no properties empty of more than 10 years.

If Brent Council is working to full potential, our Council Tax should not have to be increased. Long term empty property criteria give rise to additional Council Tax. For example, a property that has been empty for 2 to 4 years is liable to pay 200% (twice) the Council Tax, properties that are empty for 5 years the council tax is 300%, properties that are empty for 10 years or more should pay 400%.

The Conservatives are concerned that of the 1604 empty properties of less than 2 years, Brent Council should have collected approximately £3.2 million (average council tax per property of £2000). However, our concern is that the total collected for 2023/24 is £1.5 million. There is a big discrepancy in empty properties as per the National Census 9000+ in Brent and Brent Council's records show only 3000+ as vacant.

### Free bulk waste collection and Licensing

The Conservative Group propose bringing back the free bulk waste collection scheme which has been suggested by many residents to discourage unscrupulous people from fly-tipping and dumping sofas, fridges and other bulky items on our streets. It is not right that Brent residents pay one of the highest Council Tax in London only to be charged again to have their waste collected. This perhaps is a contentious issue for the Brent Labour Administration.

### NCIL (Neighbourhood Infrastructure Levy)

The Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy (NCIL), which is a community funding programme using money collected from developers, has £16.6million currently available.

We are proposing part of the NCIL money is used for Community Safety such as CCTV, Enforcement officers, and youth-based activities to prevent knife crime, serious youth violence and

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school exclusions by engaging, educating, and empowering disadvantaged young people and supporting them to enjoy their lives and improve their prospects.

This should also be used to ameliorate infrastructure, including pavements and roads around the new developments and that will relieve the pressure on the revenue budget. This is a political decision to be made.

### What Conservatives are proposing:

#### Investing in Shared Services and Cutting Waste at the Civic Centre

We recognise the importance of Shared Services and how they can generate savings to both Brent Council and the authorities we share services with.

One of the most successful Shared Services arrangements in the country is that of Westminster City Council with Kensington & Chelsea. This arrangement has reduced the cost of the Council by £50m. The London Boroughs of Wandsworth and Richmond have a sharing arrangement, and combining services, for an annual saving of £10 million.

Brent Conservatives propose a shared services arrangement with both our Legal Services and a back-office arrangement with Harrow Council and/or Barnet Council. Savings derived from Shared Services arrangements will enable the Council to focus on and implement the borough plan for Brent for 2023-2027. Additionally, in making more savings we want Shared Services in waste disposal so that Brent residents can use Harrow waste sites to reduce carbon footprints of car journeys and reduce pollution. We would also like Brent Council to note that this is an area where we are sure savings can be made and the additional facilities welcomed by residents.

#### Care, Health & Wellbeing (CHW) – Adult Social Care

**We note that CHW budget is huge, £122+ million, we are not proposing any savings to be made in this area, but The Conservative Group's view is that there is scope to identify efficiencies and serve the residents better, and particularly regards to agency staff and Care agencies, investing in full time staff.**

To achieve these efficiencies, the council must work closely with all partners, including NHS England and NHS Improvement (London), London Integrated Care Systems, the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, London Mayor, Home Office and Department of Health & Social Care. Assessments and Reviews must be quicker and more efficient. The Conservative Group recognises that there is a need to provide long-term care and support for vulnerable Brent Residents.

**We recognise that this service should continue to provide the best possible care for our residents, however, to avoid dipping into our reserves, further savings in 2024/25 should be explored and made.**

A range of modern equipment can either directly assist a person to carry out tasks of care (and reduce the need for personal care) or can monitor a person so that they are more secure and safe. These cannot replace personal care but for some people in particular circumstances they can reduce the need for formal care. They work best when linked to other actions that are in place to support a person to live more independently. **Minister for Care recently announced that several councils received the first £3 million of our Adult Social Care Technology Fund.** More care at home and

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more personalised care is what people want to support independence in the home, undertake a personalised falls prevention programme etc., and most importantly reduce pressure on the NHS.

### **Helping Local Businesses**

To revive our high streets and help local businesses to get back on their feet as we are proposing a 1-hour free parking (on street and off-street parking) throughout the borough. This will allow residents to park and shop, go to the bank, or Post Office for longer, helping support small businesses.

Neighbouring run Conservative Harrow Council recently introduced 1 Hour free parking in all car parks across Harrow. This has been warmly welcomed by residents and businesses, who have seen an uptake in usage. It is estimated that this would cost Brent £1m in terms of a reduction to current budgeted income and will be funded by re-allocating the New Homes Bonus Grant from Capital to Revenue, which is allowed under the current grant conditions.

### **General Fund Reserves 2024**

**Brent Labour administration draft budget proposes to increase the General Fund reserve from £18 million to £19 million for 2024/25. Brent Conservative Group proposes NOT do this and instead transfer this one-off increase to support the 2024/25 revenue budget.**

### **Children & Young People**

The Conservative Group fails to see the logic of making a saving of £50,000 when we are already overspending, in fact we should be putting money in into our children's services to support our young people. However, we feel that this department needs to robustly assess the ability to provide better service and support parents' capacity and resources to improve their children's outcomes at early stages within the budget.

### **Finance & Resources**

#### **Landlords Incentives**

**The Conservative Group proposes to remove the Landlords Incentive Scheme. In the Labour draft budget, Brent Labour is giving generous grants of £1+ million as an incentive to Landlords to bring their properties back into use to rent out in 2024/25. We feel that it is wrong to subsidise private landlords in this way as it acts as an incentive to keep rents artificially high. They should be sourcing finance from other sources to renovate their properties to rent out. If the property remains empty the landlord will be liable for high Council Tax which benefits the council either way. It is therefore our proposal to scrap the scheme. If the landlord cannot carry out improvements and put the property to rent, he can sell it and creating an opportunity for new house hunters to climb the ladder. It is estimated that this would result in a saving of £1m.**

#### **Second selective licensing scheme from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024**

The council is implementing a policy whereby all landlords will require a costly license from £700 per house. This is increasing the bureaucracy and not helping the tenants because the landlords

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are increasing the rent immediately passing it onto the tenants, another example of where Labour is disincentivising landlords from renting their properties. On one hand Brent Labour is incentivising landlords, and on the other hand they are penalising them.

### **New Home Bonus Scheme**

The New Homes Bonus is not a ring-fenced grant, which means local authorities are free to decide how to spend it, as they are in the best position to make decisions about local priorities. As a non-ringfenced grant, funds can be spent on either revenue or capital, strategic projects, or placed in a local authority's reserves. There is no time limit on when the funds can be spent. However, the Government expects local authorities to engage with the communities most affected by housing growth to decide how the money is spent, so residents can share in the benefits of growth.

**The council will receive £2.9 million New Homes Bonus for 2024/25. The Labour Group has allocated in their draft budget as capital, we propose to move this into the revenue budget for 2024-25.**

### **Governance**

#### **Bringing an end to excessive Labour Council payments**

In 2022, the number of councillors reduced from 63 to 57 members. However, the savings have been re-distributed to the Labour councillors only instead of making a saving in the council budget. In the Labour draft budget, it is proposed that the Chairs of the 4 Connect Forums will get an increase from £1,304 to £2,068. This is £500 per meeting via Zoom just for chairing a Zoom meeting. There is no recognition for opposition councillors who work equally hard for their residents. Whilst considering SRA's (Special Responsibility Allowances) it should be noted that Brent Opposition members were removed as Vice Chairs of Scrutiny Committees, taken away last year even though there was no allowance. This is a murder of democracy!

There is a vast difference with the responsibility of Cabinet members, currently there are nine cabinet members, and we propose to delete 2 Cabinet posts and merge the portfolios. Nearly all Labour members are in receipt of at least one Special Responsibility Allowance. The Opposition do not believe in job creation or roles with extra payments at the cost of front-line services.

The Conservative Group proposes that Opposition members should be given back the Vice Chair roles with appropriate SRAs. This will be better for scrutiny and democracy.

#### **Making Brent Cleaner and Greener**

##### **Blue Sack Cardboard recycling**

In October 2023 Brent introduced the Blue Bag Recycling scheme. This is not working!

Many blue bags have blown away, tearing or stolen, residents have taken to dumping large cardboard boxes on the pavements as Veolia won't collect the cardboard placed in the blue recycling bins.

All councillors are facing backlashes over this disastrous recycling plan. Opposition to Brent Council's new blue sack recycling scheme is growing as frustrated residents' call this reduce

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fortnightly collection “waste of money” and claim it makes it more difficult to recycle.

The Conservative group is proposing to reverse the blue sack cardboard recycling as it has been an ill thought scheme that has and will not work and revert back to recycling in the blue bins. The idea that the cardboard does not get wet with the lid closed is a myth and in practice does not work. It is estimated that this would lead to a loss of income from recycling by £1.2m. Our proposal is to fund this shortfall by using the New Homes Bonus grant.

### Making Brent a Safer Borough

#### Reversing the proposal to dim streetlights.

**The Conservative Group is proposing to put more money into street lighting by reversing the current policy of dimming the streetlights. Residents are dismayed and dimming lights has sparked fears of a rise in crime and road accidents. The elderly effectively are placed under a curfew as they fear going out. Diming the lights in Brent has made our streets unsafe to walk for commuters. It is estimated that this proposal would cost £0.5m, again we will fund from the New Homes Bonus grant.**

### Street Works

The Conservative Group wants utility companies to be **handed heavy fines for carrying out sub-standard road repairs**. Residents and motorists should have a reasonable expectation that the roads they are travelling on are well maintained and free of defects and holes.

We want the worst performing utility companies whose road works fail to meet strict standards to face financial penalties and be inspected to ensure their work meets rigorous criteria and they leave the roads in a good condition.

### Potholes and Broken pavements

**In the Labour draft budget, the allocation for Reactive Maintenance covers all highways assets including lines, signs, street furniture, footways and carriageways and is £0.8m. The Conservative Group proposes to increase this to £1.2 million.** This additional amount will be funded by use of the New Homes Bonus grant.

### Increase in Knife Crime Incidents

Unfortunately, knife-related incidents have escalated across Brent in comparison to previous reporting periods. As a Council, we need to do much more to understand what is driving the increase, address this issue and reduce offences in the borough. Local Police in conjunction with Brent Council’s Communities and Safer Neighbourhoods should conduct more targeted knife crime awareness sessions with schools and parents in the new financial year.

**When times are hard, we must tighten our belts and seek better value and explore further savings without negative impact to the service.**

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### The Conservative Group's Funding Proposal 2024/25

<b>Conservative Group - Alternative budget proposals</b>	<b>Impact on 2024/25 budget £m</b>
1 Hour free parking on high streets (loss of income)	1.0
Removal of landlord incentives (saving)	(1.0)
Delete two Cabinet members (saving)	(0.1)
Reintroduce blue bins	1.2
Reverse dimming of streetlights	0.5
Increase budget for potholes and pavement repairs	0.4
Top slice of New Homes Bonus to fund additional borrowing for the capital programme	0.3
All of the above funded by re-allocating NHB grant from capital to revenue	(2.81)
Increase Council Tax by 3.99% (loss of income)	1.5
Maintain the current reserve level at £18m	(1.0)
<b>Total</b>	<b>0.0</b>

We commend these Conservative Group amendments to the Labour draft budget. We thank the officers for supporting the group in preparing this budget amendment.

**Cllr Suresh Kansagra, Leader, Brent Conservative Group**

# Brent Conservatives Amendments to the Council Budget 2024/2025

## Advice from the Corporate & Director of Finance

Senior finance support has been provided to assist the Conservative Group to formulate an alternative budget that reflects their policy priorities.

The Alternative Budget proposed by the Conservative Group would be a legal, balanced budget for 2024/25, although it is recognised that this carries financial risk. The potential implications for 2025/26 and beyond have not been considered as part of these proposals.

Overall, these proposals introduce £3.41m of new spending commitments and £1.5m of revenue foregone from increasing council tax by 3.99% (1% below the maximum amount allowable), balanced by £1.1m of new savings, £1m of one-off reserves and re-allocating the New Homes Bonus grant from the capital programme to the revenue budget.

Firstly, these proposals are heavily dependent on the NHB grant. The Council received £3.1m of NHB in 2022/23, £7.9m in 2023/24 and is due to receive £2.9m in 2024/25. This is a non-ring-fenced grant that is currently recorded as a reserve and used to finance the capital programme. Allocating a proportion of the grant into the Council's revenue budget is allowed under the current grant conditions, however this would have an impact on the financing of the capital programme. In addition, as can be seen from the figures, this grant is highly unpredictable and is one of the reasons why this grant has historically not been budgeted for in the revenue budget. There is therefore a risk of building this volatile grant (which has been subject to government top slicing and various rule changes over the years) into the base budget and calls into question the sustainability of the proposals set out in this report that are to be funded by this grant.

In addition, the consequences of removing New Homes Bonus grant from financing of the capital programme will have significant consequences that will need to be managed. In the short term this means further borrowing to finance the capital programme. While the financing of this additional borrowing has been factored into the budget proposals, it does add risk to the medium-term financial strategy as budgets generally become more constrained while capital repayments are fixed.

It is also worth noting that there are proposals that make reference to provision of free bulky waste and use of NCIL. As instructed by the Conservative Group, these have not been costed and do not form part of this alternative budget.

Finally, section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003 requires that I, as Corporate Director of Finance and Resources, report to Council my view of the adequacy of reserves and the robustness of the estimates underpinning the budget. This assessment is set out in more detail in section 6 of the budget report. In summary, the General Fund reserve is held to cover uncertain events that may transpire, such as an unexpected overspend or to cover bumps in cash flow. The level is subjective and requires professional judgement, however it is generally accepted that 5% of net expenditure should be held as a generally useable reserve. When setting the budget for 2024/25 it was deemed necessary to increase the General Fund reserve by £1m in order for this reserve to keep within 5% of the Council's net budget. In addition, our external auditors would be critical of deviating away from the current strategy and comment negatively in their annual value for money report.

The proposal to not increase the General Fund reserve by £1m would result in a balance of 4.6% of net expenditure. On balance, this is not a significant deviation from the current strategy, but it is not a medium to long term position that can be maintained. Despite the financial pressures facing the Council, the level of external scrutiny on Councils to demonstrate financial resilience and sustainability is expected to increase. Therefore, this proposal needs to be included a commitment

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that the 5% level of General Fund reserves is maintained from 2025/26. Overall, this proposal adds risk to the 2024/25 budget but is not unlawful.

**Minesh Patel**  
**Corporate Director of Finance & Resources**