



**Resources and Public Realm  
Scrutiny Committee**

18 January 2022

**Report from the Strategic Director  
of Customer and Digital Services  
and the Strategic Director of  
Regeneration and Environment**

**Covid-19 Recovery Report**

<b>Wards Affected:</b>	All
<b>Key or Non-Key Decision:</b>	Non-Key
<b>Open or Part/Fully Exempt:</b> <small>(If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)</small>	Open
<b>No. of Appendices:</b>	1 – Brent Financial Inclusion Statement
<b>Background Papers:</b>	None
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## **1.0 Purpose of the Report**

- 1.1 To inform Members of the Committee of the cross cutting activity taking place to help Brent's businesses and economic recovery in the Borough since the 'Recovery from Covid-19' considered by Full Council report on 12 July 20121.

## **2.0 Recommendations**

- 2.1 That Members of the Committee note the holistic approach the council has taken to economic and community recovery throughout the Covid-19 pandemic

## **3.0 Detail**

### **Introduction**

- 3.1 This report provides an update on progress on initiatives included in the 12 July 'Recovery from Covid-19' report to Full Council, it particularly focuses on initiatives to support Brent residents and businesses to recover from the economic impact of the Pandemic.

Please see below for a summary of what is included in this report.

<b>Report Summary</b>
1. Inclusive Growth Strategy
2. High Street Recovery
3. Ethical Procurement Policy and Support for Local Businesses
4. Resident Support Schemes
5. Ethical Debt Policy and Recovery
6. Employability and Skills Support

- 3.2 The 12 July Cabinet report estimated that the Brent economy had contracted by 9% in 2020, losing 3,800 jobs (a fall of 2.6% compared with 1.9% for West London as a whole and 1.5% for the UK). For 2021, a further loss of 3,700 jobs was forecast with slow job growth afterwards, adding 2,600 jobs by 2025 - an average 0.3% per year, the second-lowest rate across the seven WLA boroughs. It is expected that employment will not return to its pre-pandemic level until 2024.
- 3.3 According to Official Labour Market Statistics, the unemployment rate in Brent was 4% in September 2019, lower than the London average of 4.6%. However, this rose to 5.8% in June 2020 and to 7.6% in June 2021 (London average for June 2021 was 6.5%). The pandemic has had an adverse impact on unemployment levels in the borough, increasing unemployment levels from below the London average to above the London average, indicating that Brent residents have been particularly impacted by Covid-19. Furthermore, whilst the London average gross weekly pay increased from £714.30 in 2020 to £728.40 in 2021, it decreased for Brent residents, falling from £639.50 to £623.80. This highlights the acute hardship faced by Brent residents due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Support for Businesses**

### **Inclusive Growth Strategy (IGS)**

- 3.4 The IGS (2019-2040) was adopted prior to the pandemic and the objectives are long term, although much is even more relevant to supporting inclusive recovery now, and progress has been made. Inclusive growth aims to ensure that everyone has the ability to participate and share in the benefits of growth in the borough. The IGS looks at what position the borough is in now, the key trends likely to affect the borough, and potential responses and initiatives to guide and shape how those trends will impact the borough.
- 3.5 The one-year review gives an update on the IGS in the context of the pandemic. It mentions how Brent's key sectors of manufacturing, transport and construction are particularly vulnerable, making it imperative to raise resident skill levels and to increase business support. In addition to the pandemic, demographic and technological changes will influence Brent's economy, with 30% of jobs at risk of automation over the next 20 years. In addition to these examples, Brent faces multiple challenges over the course of the pandemic and the coming years. The full review is available at:

<https://www.brent.gov.uk/your-community/regeneration/inclusive-growth-strategy/>

### **High street recovery**

- 3.6 Considerable engagement and support has been given to High Streets and other businesses over the last 2 years; including:
- Publication of an online delivery map
  - Advice on safe re-opening
  - 'Shop Safe, Shop Local' campaigns including bus adverts, radio adverts and tote bags
  - Street/pavement widening
  - Business newsletters to over 12,000 businesses
  - Advice and help on the various grant/loan schemes. By December 2021 the Council has paid out over £129m of grants
  - A further £655k of funding for micro-businesses has been agreed
  - Five sector specific toolkits launched on how to reduce carbon footprint and save money in the process
  - Webinars covering 'Going Green to Survive and Thrive', 'Doing business with Brent', and 'Meet the Buyer' supply chains
  - Local supplier list to register local businesses interested in upcoming contracts (over 250 local businesses registered)
  - Black business tracker
  - 5<sup>th</sup> Small Business Saturday Awards.
  - Greening, street art and shopfront improvements
  - Town centre diversification; creating a framework for investments in vacant properties
  - Deep cleaning of some town centres, removal of street furniture
  - Digital skills and training opportunities.

- Town centre events e.g. Diwali, Christmas, and more planned for Summer 2022.

### ***Town Centre Managers***

3.7 Brent has four Town Centre Managers who work across nine priority town centres. Together they have:

- Supported over 1950 businesses to reopen and adjust to new COVID-19 guidelines.
- Identified social distancing pinch points on high streets and collaborated to resolve them.
- Assisted businesses to implement audio messaging in different languages to remind shoppers of new rules.
- Supported businesses with applications for street trading.

#### **Case Study: Town Centre Managers**

**Circumstance:** Mr AH cannot speak English and was not registered for his business rates. He was also being threatened by his landlord and explained that his family in India were in danger and he wanted to commit suicide.

**Action:** The Town Centre Manager alerted NNDR immediately and together they ensured a safe grant application process as well as helping him register all documents. The Town Centre Manager spoke in Hindi and assured him that the matter would remain confidential.

**Outcome:** AH was correctly registered and awarded the correct level of grant funding. All of this was conducted without his landlord being privy to confidential information. With all data remaining confidential the landlord stopped harassing AH, allowing the him to remain and trade in peace”.

### ***Economic and Community Recovery***

- 3.8 The Council is increasing the number of meetings we currently hold as standard with local businesses to ensure we continue to support the local economy during this challenging time. These include workshops and training to assist SMEs where needed, to identify the challenges and opportunities currently faced by Brent’s voluntary and community sector and how best we can support them.
- 3.9 We are also utilising the Brent Fast Track scheme which allows local businesses (as part of their Social Value) to pay SMEs on immediate terms, bypassing the 30 days without charge.
- 3.10 Where necessary the Council is relaxing Procurement rules, in line with COVID-19 national finance guidance, to enable direct awards to be made. This enables us to respond quickly to commission required capacity and services in line with local need and demand.

- 3.11 Where feasible, the Council will seek quotes for relative level spend for goods/works/services from local businesses. We ask local SMEs to register on the Local Supplier Registration webpage and we can Direct Award under £25k for SMEs when possible. For anything between £25k - FTS threshold we seek three quotes and we include at least one SME from Brent if possible. Anything above FTS threshold, we ask bidders to tell us what percentage of the contract value they will be spending on Local SMEs.
- 3.12 The council publishes a Prior Information Notice before each financial year to alert the market of any future opportunities coming up for every open tender. This will allow SMEs to prepare for opportunities they would like to participate in.

### ***BuyBrent App***

- 3.13 The BuyBrent app, the first e-commerce platform commissioned by a London borough, launched on 20<sup>th</sup> October as part of the programme to deliver Brent's digital strategy. Since the launch, over 160 businesses have signed up to the app and there have been 1500 downloads. The aim of the free app is to get residents to buy local, connecting local traders with the local community, making it quick and easy for people to find great products and services nearby. To incentivise commerce, exclusive local rewards, offers and discounts are available via the app.
- 3.14 To support the successful implementation of the app, it is accompanied by a significant marketing campaign. This includes the launch of BuyBrent social media accounts, a TFL campaign across stations and buses in Brent and radio adverts. The promotion will continue across social media and targeted advertising in the New Year.

### ***Digital Support Fund for Businesses***

- 3.15 The digital support fund for businesses pilot, launched on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2022, provides a laptop, Microsoft package, connectivity, access to BuyBrent (council's e-commerce platform) and digital skills training for 100 SMEs in Brent. As this is a pilot, the businesses will be identified by the town centre managers and supported to complete the form online. All recipients have agreed to take part in a 6 month training programme to develop their digital skills and the impact will be measured to inform requirements for further investment. To meet the eligibility criteria all business must be trading in Brent, have less than 50 employees and confirm they are willing to develop their digital skills to support their business growth. All devices are provided as a gift and are not expected to be returned to the council. This pilot will be used to develop a longer-term scheme to provide digital support for businesses.

### ***Business database***

- 3.16 FAME is a business database that has been commissioned on a one year pilot to provide detailed insight into the types of businesses in Brent, their contact information and analysis of upcoming sectors in the area.
- 3.17 The data has been used to promote BuyBrent to specific sectors in the borough. It has also been used to identify local businesses to engage in council contracts, therefore supporting the procurement strategy objectives. Staff capacity has also been increased as less time is required to find contact details for businesses in the borough.

### **Ethical Procurement Policy and Support for Local Businesses**

#### ***Ethical Procurement Policy***

- 3.18 The Council is committed to ensuring a high standard of ethical trade practices, across its commissioning and procurement activities. In accordance with this policy, the council expects its suppliers, service providers and contractors to observe the policy's provisions and to demonstrate a similar commitment.
- 3.19 The council's ethical procurement principles include:
- Integrity and transparency
  - Safe working conditions
  - Promoting good health
  - Freely chosen employment
  - Prejudgement
  - Fair and legal working hours
  - Legal wages and contracts
  - Regular employment
  - Providing training
  - Clear dispute procedures
  - No discrimination
  - Eliminating child labour
  - No inhuman treatment
- 3.20 More detail on these principles can be found in the 'Social Value and Ethical Procurement Policy', available at:
- <https://democracy.brent.gov.uk/documents/s96911/12a.%20Appendix%201%20-%20Social%20Value%20Policy%20and%20Ethical%20Procurement.pdf>
- 3.21 Additionally, the Council wants to ensure Social Value is integral in all its procurements, benefitting Brent's communities and embraced by all involved. The figures below detail how suppliers are supporting the Council priorities. The breakdown, dating from June 2020, confirms that our suppliers are delivering social value across the priorities in the borough plan:
- Strong foundations (£657K - 27%)
  - Every opportunity to succeed (£948K- 38%)
  - A future built for everyone, an economy fit for all (£597K - 24%)

- A cleaner, more considerate Brent (£162K - 7%)
- A borough where we can all feel safe, secure, happy and healthy (£108K - 4%)
- Total commitment among 21 received files (£2.472M - 100%)

3.22 For more information, please see the 'Annual Procurement Strategy Report 2020-21', available at:

<https://democracy.brent.gov.uk/documents/s115378/09.%20Annual%20Procurement%20Strategy.pdf>

### ***Additional Restrictions Grant***

3.23 The Additional Restrictions Grant, announced in December 2021, will see businesses in the hospitality and leisure sectors in England eligible for one-off grants of up to £6,000 per premises. Central Government will also cover the cost of Statutory Sick Pay for Covid-related absences for small and medium-sized employers across the UK (less than 250 employees) for up to 2 weeks leave.

3.24 Local Authorities will have the discretion to allocate this funding to businesses most in need. The ARG top up will be prioritised for those local authorities that have distributed the most of their existing allocation.

3.25 These additional measures will reinforce the existing package of business support, including:

- business rates relief meaning that the majority of businesses in the hospitality and leisure sectors will see a 75% reduction in their business rates bill across the entire financial year and a new 50% capped business rates relief next financial year;
- Covid Additional Relief Fund for businesses that have not previously had business rates support;
- businesses will be protected from eviction if they are behind on rent on their premises, thanks to the moratorium in place until March 2022.

3.26 Both the Additional Restrictions Grant and the Covid Additional Relief Fund will be implemented in 2022.

### ***NNDR (Business Rates) Ethical Enforcement***

3.27 Collection remains significantly below pre-pandemic levels. Relief for retail, hospitality and leisure ratepayers has been provided again by government for 2021/22, 100% relief in quarter one and 66% for quarters two to four. Furthermore, businesses benefitted from Restart grants and Additional Restrictions grants. The Covid Additional Relief Fund (CARF) was announced in December 2021 by government and will be implemented by the Council in 2022, it aims to support businesses who have so not benefitted from government support with their rates bills.

- 3.28 Many businesses continue to struggle with debts. The Council has so far not taken court action and when this does start, it will be restricted to a small number of businesses. The service has though been agreeing to arrangements that run for longer periods than would be acceptable pre-pandemic.

***Meanwhile Use Pilot and Affordable Workspace***

- 3.29 The Meanwhile Use pilot in Church End is progressing and other locations are being sourced. Affordable workspace SPD is shortly to go out to consultation (subject to Cabinet approval); this includes that operators should seek to rent 75% of units to Brent residents. There are currently six affordable workspace locations in the Borough.

***Neasden Growth Stations SDP Masterplan***

- 3.30 This initiative seeks to define a new place for the post-pandemic world that balances local choices within the wider metropolitan context. The delivery of new workspace, improved accessibility to the wider area, an interconnected network of green open spaces, enhanced public realm and a permeable movement network will create an inclusive neighbourhood that can support at least 2,000 new homes, and also serve as a distinctive gateway to Neasden.

***Local Plan***

- 3.31 The Local Plan is likely to be adopted this year, with examples of inclusive policies including requiring employment and training plans on major developments, new policies on inclusive design, restrictions on the number of hot food takeaways close to schools and excessive clustering of gambling premises in High Streets. An Article 4 Direction is also proposed to come into effect later in 2022 to prevent the permitted change of use of priority High Street ground floor premises to residential.

***Levelling Up Fund Award***

- 3.32 The Council received £7.75m (one of only four London boroughs to receive an award) to contribute towards the provision of enhanced community facilities and an enterprise hub in South Kilburn.

***Risks and Mitigations***

- 3.33 The uncertainty that has been created by the ongoing response to new variants of Covid-19 and the pace with which recovery projects are being rolled out, means that there are risks that initiatives will not achieve the beneficial impact that is hoped for. Officers are continually monitoring market forces, trends and emerging challenges in order to ensure that corrective / mitigating actions can be taken. The objective is to ensure that projects can be flexed in order to ensure that the outcomes of the Council's approach to economic recovery can be achieved. Some elements of the programme, such as the Wembley High Road and Church End Exemplar schemes specifically attempt to identify which type of initiative can be most beneficial in terms of delivering positive outcomes. Monitoring and evaluation will take place in order to facilitate identification of the most advantageous initiatives so that they may be rolled out across other areas.



## **Support for Residents**

### **Resident Support Schemes and Services**

#### ***Resident Support Fund***

- 3.34 For the 2021/22 financial year, £3m is available via the Resident Support Fund (RSF) for Brent residents who are experiencing financial hardship. As of 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2021, £1,520,744.25 had been awarded, 51% of the total fund. Since August 2020, 1594 applications have been paid out worth £3,285,774.
- 3.35 Residents can get support with a range of issues such as:
- Rent arrears and mortgage interest only arrears
  - Household expenditure – utility bills e.g. water, gas and electricity.
  - Household appliances - essential white goods
  - Food expenditure
  - Council Tax arrears
  - Paying off debts e.g. credit card loans
  - Counselling and mental health services
  - Getting access to the internet, a laptop or both.
  - Essentials linked to energy and water (including sanitary products, warm clothing, soap, blankets, boiler service/repair)
  - Transport related costs due to winter
- 3.36 In addition to financial support, the RSF offers residents employability skills support, with 1560 residents referred for employment and skills support since August 2020.
- 3.37 Following the 6 October announcement of the Household Support Fund (HSF) from central government, in which Brent was awarded £2,781,222.28, the Council has fully incorporated the HSF application into the RSF. This has simplified and streamlined the application process for residents, making it easier to get financial support. £585,000 of HSF money has been added to the RSF. As of 23 December, £183,914.42 has been awarded, 31% of the total fund.
- 3.38 As part of HSF, the Council has awarded £735,775 in supermarket vouchers to families eligible for free school meals and other residents in need of support during the October and Christmas school holidays. This followed on from similar schemes which have been used to provide vouchers to support with food and utilities since Winter 2020-21. Free school meal vouchers will be distributed again in February and April, alongside supporting care leavers with their accommodation costs. This funding will also continue to be used to support food banks, family wellbeing centres, Hubs and Customer Services and costs relating to adult social care.

### **Case Study: RSF**

**Circumstance:** A single parent with one child requested help with paying utility bills and rising debts. She was unemployed from April 2021 and struggling financially but she had recently started working. However, in the time she was unemployed she had accrued some debts. As a single parent, she was struggling to support her child and herself on one salary as well as paying off debts.

**Action:** The Resident Support Fund was able to award her the full amount she requested (£1,722) to pay off utility bills and debts.

**Outcome:** This award helped to get the applicant out of debt, allowing her to use her newfound employment to build a more financially stable future.

### ***Brent Recovery Fund***

- 3.39 In September 2021, £500K was allocated to further support residents. Target groups are unemployed residents of all ages including the priority groups of care leavers, women, people with SEND and people from disadvantaged ethnic minorities.

### ***Council Tax Support Scheme***

- 3.40 Through the Council Tax Support scheme, Brent residents can receive help with council tax payments. The scheme for pensioners mirrors the national scheme, but the scheme for taxpayers of working age potentially provides a rebate of up to 100% of their liability, whereas most councils insist on a contribution as much as 25% regardless of ability to pay. Recipients of Council Tax Support has increased by over 10% compared to 2020/21.

Discretionary council tax relief is available to care leavers aged 18-24. The Council identifies eligible care leavers and relief is awarded automatically with no application needed. This scheme eases the transition for care-leavers turning 18. £106,000 has been awarded to care leavers during the current financial year, with 89 accounts benefitting.

### ***Brent Hubs***

- 3.41 Brent Hubs provided early intervention support with issues such as housing, debt, and employment to around 5,000 residents in the period from 1 April – 30 September 2021. Around 2,000 of these residents have been connected with food banks. Hub advisors are also able to distribute emergency food and fuel vouchers to residents in need of urgent support whilst more long-term measures of support are put in place. The Hubs have also been supporting residents in applying for the Resident Support Fund.
- 3.42 Brent Hubs advisors have provided satellite outreach services, including the regular delivery of the core hub offer at two Brent foodbanks and a pop-up support event at a council owned housing block. In 2022, the Brent Hubs offer will be expanding further to the Brent Civic Centre and satellite services will also be scaled up.

### **Case Study: Brent Hubs**

**Circumstance:** S was long term unemployed for over 5 years, she has a husband who is not working that she supports with his mental health issues and a school aged daughter. S had several ongoing problems with her Housing Benefit, Council Tax Support and My Account. She was not coping well, and considerable debts had built up as a result.

**Action:** S registered with The Living Room (part of Brent Hubs) for Employment Support. An Employment Support Officer sourced potential courses for her to improve her numeracy and IT skills, and a Hub Advisor referred her for debt advice with The Sheriff Centre (a Hub partner organisation). Due to her lack of income, she was struggling to feed her family so the Hubs also supported her with food aid provision.

**Outcome:** S completed two training courses: Maths Level 1, and an IT basics course. The Sherriff Centre resolved benefit issues and showed her what she must do to avoid the same situation moving forward. She was awarded benefits that cancelled out all of her arrears, and she cleared all of her debts entirely. Her confidence has greatly improved now that she understands how to manage her Housing Benefit. She has CV with qualifications, which she did not have before, and she is using computers for herself now. She is now focusing on securing employment and is now much more independent, confident and as a result job ready.

### ***Food Bank Support***

- 3.43 Over £100K of grant funding from the COVID Winter and Local Support Fund has been provided to Brent food banks since March 2021 to increase their capacity to provide food aid support to Brent residents in need. Further grant support for organisations delivering food aid will be distributed in the next few months using funds from the Household Support Fund.
- 3.44 One of the funding criteria is for food banks to develop referral routes with Brent Hubs. Alerts have been established so that if a resident receives more than six food parcels from a Brent foodbank, a notification is provided to Brent Hub officers so that they can work with the individual to address and resolve any underlying issues such as debt or unemployment. Additionally, a cash first leaflet has been produced to encourage people to pursue other available support, such as the Resident Support Fund, hardship payments, and independent debt advice.

### ***Winter Fuel Support***

- 3.45 The current support available for residents experiencing fuel poverty includes access to fuel vouchers via Brent Hubs for emergency top ups for pre-payment gas and electricity meters; access to grant funds from the Resident Support Fund to support with energy and utility bills; and, established referral routes

between Brent Hubs and agencies who specialise in fuel and utility support, such as Green Doctors and SHINE.

- 3.46 Work is ongoing to improve referral routes and signposting for support services to assist residents experiencing fuel poverty this winter. Staff briefing sessions have taken place with colleagues in housing and this support is being expanded across the Council. A Fuel Poverty toolkit is being developed for internal and external colleagues, and activities will take place to increase awareness of services and support available to Brent residents

### ***Digital Support Fund for Residents***

- 3.47 The digital support fund for residents launched in August 2020 as part of the RSF. It provides digital devices and 12 months connectivity (Mifis or fibre) to all digitally excluded residents who provide evidence that they have under £6,000. Through the application residents are now able to select if they would benefit from a Chromebook or tablet depending on their specific needs. This is following feedback from residents and other digital inclusion pilots. All devices are provided as a gift and are not expected to be returned to the council.
- 3.48 As of week commencing 13<sup>th</sup> December the following support has been provided:
- 355 digital devices
  - 61 Mifi hotspots
  - 11 fibre connections

### **Resident Quotes: Digital Support Fund**

*“I’m more confident in this digital world after learning these new skills... I feel I’m more independent”*

*“I have a Chromebook. It’s very helpful... My old laptop, I had difficulties last year, how to save, how to use it. But this Chromebook is very easy, very easy to use and easy to understand.”*

*“Everything in life is now by the computer.”*

### ***Digital Support Fund for Children and Young People***

- 3.49 The digital support fund for children and young people, launched on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2022, provides a laptop, Microsoft package, safeguarding software and connectivity to 296 digitally excluded young people in the borough. There are no qualifying benefits criteria, for example young people who do not receive free schools meals or have no recourse to public funds will also have access to this fund.
- 3.50 This is the first stage of longer-term investment into digital inclusion for children and young people in Brent. A crowdfunding platform will launch in May 2022,

up to £50,000 will be match funded to provide an additional 197 laptops in the next financial year. This fundraising will continue in 2023 and 2024.

### **Devices for Digitally Excluded Households**

- 3.51 By working alongside the voluntary sector and utilising crowdsourcing platforms, the Council's 2022-2026 Digital Strategy sets out an aim to provide 8000 digitally excluded households with a device by 2026. These devices will provide residents with the opportunity to develop their digital skills and enhance their digital inclusion. Furthermore, by 2026 the Council also aims to:
- Give access to over 20,000 hours' worth of self-study digital skills training to all residents
  - Employ 500 trained digital champions across Brent to support residents in developing their digital skills
  - Improve and expand our front of house offering with Hubs and Family Wellbeing Centres to assist residents with developing their digital skills both face to face and virtually

### **Ethical Debt Policy and Recovery**

#### ***Ethical Debt Recovery***

- 3.52 The Ethical Debt Recovery Policy went live in February 2021. The policy operates within six principles, namely:
- i. clear charges and recovery process;
  - ii. easy and flexible payment;
  - iii. early intervention;
  - iv. clear communication;
  - v. support for individuals that cannot pay;
  - vi. action towards individuals that won't pay.
- 3.53 Customers are made aware of the value and nature of debt they owe to the Council, and the potential implications of non-payment that may include charges for late payment for certain debts.
- 3.54 The Council will respond to any dispute raised within 21 days. Any recovery action will be suspended pending the outcome of the dispute. This is a blanket approach across all lines of debt where those debts are not subject to other statutory processes.
- 3.55 Where practical we seek to prevent enforcement measures by notifying customers at an early stage that they have fallen into debt, to ensure they are aware of debts accrued as soon as possible. In specific circumstances, we may consider writing-off and not pursuing all or a portion of an individual's debt in order to prevent exacerbating severe indebtedness.
- 3.56 We use a variety of debt recovery methods to collect debts from those that can, but refuse to pay or ignore Council communications. Wherever enforcement becomes necessary, any costs incurred by the Council will be passed on to the customer.

- 3.57 The ethical approach to debt collection should be considered the right and proper approach however its impact, while not reducing overall collection does mean collection of some debts over a longer timeframe.

#### ***Debt Write-Off Procedure***

- 3.58 The Write-Off Procedure was updated in early 2021, aiming to make Brent more responsive to the needs of customers. The updated procedure empowered staff to make timely decisions in the best interest of the customer and the council. The procedures were amended to introduce a level (£200) at which officers could write off debt. All write-offs carried out are within the amount allowed for by way of bad set provision in the budget.

#### ***Ethical Debt Enforcement***

- 3.59 Anyone struggling with debt can apply for breathing space. This gives debtors legal protections from creditors for up to 60 days. The protections include pausing most enforcement action and freezing most interest and charges on their debts. Additionally, anyone receiving mental health treatment can apply for a mental health breathing space. This lasts as long as the person's mental health crisis treatment plus 30 days (no matter how long the crisis treatment lasts). There have been 82 beneficiaries since the scheme began in May 2021.
- 3.60 Legal action against non-payers is a last resort. However, despite the efforts made to contact customers, many do not respond even after a summons is issued. Therefore, it is a necessary action we sometimes have to take for those that can pay but refuse.

#### ***Financial Inclusion***

- 3.61 A cross-cutting Financial Inclusion statement, which provides clarity on the Council's current offer has been published internally and shared with partners to promote the borough-wide offer and approach (see appendix 1). Work is also underway to improve referral routes and signposting to financial inclusion support services.
- 3.62 A number of Poverty Commission Financial Inclusion and Welfare funded interventions are being delivered, including three cohorts of a financial inclusion learning programme, debt advisory support, and financial inclusion training delivered through the hubs. The interventions aim to provide early intervention and prevention for residents financially impacted by COVID-19, to improve resident's financial resilience, and improve the overall financial wellbeing of Brent residents
- 3.63 The Financial Inclusion (FI) Dashboard brings together data from, (at present), three different systems to present a more holistic view of the financial situation of residents in relation to money offered by or owed to the council. While not a new issue, it became increasingly clear during the early days of the pandemic that while funding from various sources existed to help residents, it was not always easy to create a composite picture of particular needs, nor to visualise which areas of the borough had the most pressing requirements.

- 3.64 The FI Dashboard provides an overall view of the financial situation of geographic areas to managers and decision-makers, as well as a person-level view for front-line staff, helping them to better target any required help or intervention. The long-term goal, as more systems and more data are linked in, is to provide, in one location, the data and analysis to allow staff to more quickly reach those in financial need or distress at an earlier stage, before the situation becomes desperate.
- 3.65 The FI Dashboard builds on earlier work carried out to better understand the impact of the pandemic on Brent residents, which has informed the council's approach to planning recovery initiatives (available on Brent Open Data at <https://data.brent.gov.uk/dataset/v85km/pandemic-impacts-resident-need-and-support-in-brent-evidence-pack>). It is part of a larger effort to improve the quality and efficiency of the council's work with the residents of Brent through better use of data and analysis.

### **Employability and Skills Support**

#### ***Springboard***

- 3.66 The Springboard platform was delivered and launched in October 2021, as part of the social value investment element of our contract with our digital programme technical partner Infosys. Springboard offers local people access to quality online training, aiming to improve digital inclusion and reduce unemployment post-lockdown. Jobs are changing, driven by technological change, and across the country low-skilled workers have been hit the hardest. COVID-19 compounded these challenges in Brent.
- 3.67 Infosys Springboard currently offers over 220 courses on technologies, emerging job roles, as well as professional and behavioural skills. From modules on sending effective emails to cyber-security and coding, the courses are designed to help users to build their digital skill-set and boost their appeal to employers. The cloud and mobile-based solution is accessible anytime, anywhere and on any device to ensure easy access for all residents. Users can track their progress across a range of different courses.
- 3.68 As of 10<sup>th</sup> January 2022, 5,824 residents registered on the platform and it has gained significant interest from other local authorities and regional groups, including the London Office of Technology and Innovation (LOTI).

#### ***Brent Start***

- 3.69 Brent Start provided its services virtually to learners when lockdown restrictions limited face-to-face learning, at its peak just under 1000 learners engaged with on-line learning.
- 3.70 At the end of the 2020/2021 academic year, there were over 5000 enrolments and an achievement rate of 93% (national average - 89%).

- 3.71 Additional government funding has been received for the ESOL for Integration Fund project, delivering accredited and non-accredited ESOL courses and social mixing clubs to support residents with the lowest level of English language who might be ineligible for other ESOL provision.
- 3.72 GLA also awarded Brent Start £220,000 for the Good Work for All initiative, which prioritises training, education and employability support for Londoners to gain relevant skills, retrain, and move into work in key recovery sectors e.g. Health and Social Care and Digital Skills.

### ***Tech Camp***

- 3.73 The Tech Camp and Tech Awards programmes provided opportunities for young people to engage with employers in the Tech industry, helping to equip them with the knowledge, skills and experience to develop careers in these sectors.

### ***Career Camp CIC***

- 3.74 Career Camp CIC delivered, on Brent's behalf, a digital skills programme and a Green Skills Summit, which 50 residents and 87 employers attended. Further commissions are being developed for programmes in the digital and creative sector.

### ***Brent Works***

- 3.75 Data for April 2021 to November 2021 shows that 1871 people registered for Brent Works services and for the same period, 95 people secured employment, whilst 39 people secured apprenticeships and 58 people secured a Kick-start placement.

### ***Moving On Up***

- 3.76 The Moving On Up project that supports Black Young Men into employment saw engagement with 145 participants; 34 secured employment over the period.

### ***Other programmes***

- 3.77 Other programmes include:
- Post 16 SEN event on jobs and apprenticeships
  - Focussed recruitment webinars e.g. HS2, Ingeus
  - The Forge - tri-borough employment and skills project in Park Royal
  - Brent Works Partnership Forum events
  - Willesden SDA Church Jobs Fair
  - Good Work Standard/London Living Wage Launch Event
  - Green Skills Summit
  - Disability Confident Leader accreditation
  - Disability Confidence – working with partners to improve accreditation rates.



- Mental Health and Employment Pathway – working with partners to focus on enabling delivery of targeted interventions to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities

***Programmes planned for 2022:***

3.78 Programmes launching in 2022 include:

- Digital and Creative Sector Based Work Programme, beginning in February.
- Green Skills Sector Based Work Programme.
- A Joint venture with United College's Group to open a Green Skills Centre.
- Transport & Logistics Infrastructure Development – support for residents to receive relevant skills and training to gain employment as HGV drivers. In procurement for delivery in spring.
- Supporting young people with SEND/health needs - subsidised job placements for people who have completed supported internships.

**4.0 Financial Implications**

4.1 There are no financial implications resulting directly from the content of this report.

**5.0 Legal Implications**

5.1 There are no legal implications resulting directly from the content of this report.

**6.0 Equality Implications**

6.1 There are no equality implications resulting directly from the content of this report.

**7.0 Consultation with Ward Members and Stakeholders**

7.1 None.

**8.0 Human Resources and Property Implications**

8.1 There are no human resources or property implications resulting directly from the content of this report.

Related papers: Recovery from Covid 19, Full Council, 12 July 2021

**Report sign off:**

Alan Lunt

Strategic Director of Regeneration and  
Environment

Peter Gadsdon

Strategic Director, Customer and Digital  
Services