 <b>Brent</b>	<b>Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee</b> 6 September 2022
	<b>Report from the Corporate Director Resident Services</b>
<b>Cost of Living Crisis</b>	

<b>Wards Affected:</b>	All Wards
<b>Key or Non-Key Decision:</b>	Non-key
<b>Open or Part/Fully Exempt:</b>	Open
<b>No. of Appendices:</b>	None
<b>Background Papers:</b>	None
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## 1.0 Purpose of the Report

1.1 To outline the actions the Council is taking to mitigate the impact of the Cost of Living crisis in Brent and update members of the Committee on the progress of the Cost of Living themed Outcome Based Review (OBR).

## 2.0 Recommendations

2.1 Members of the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee are asked to:

- Note the actions the Council is taking to mitigate the impact of the Cost of Living crisis; and
- Note the progress of the Cost of Living crisis themed OBR

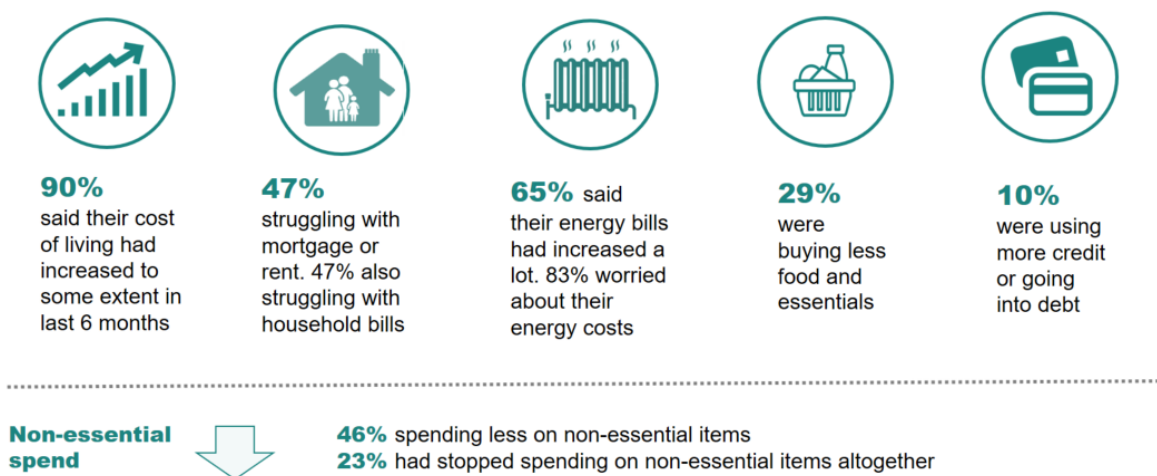
## 3.0 Detail

3.1 Since late 2021, the UK has experienced a rise in the costs of living for individuals and businesses. For many Brent residents, this means having to

make difficult decisions on how they spend their income, which can have a negative impact on their standard of living.

3.2 In a recent attitudes survey<sup>1</sup>, 90% of Londoners surveyed said their cost of living had increased to some extent in the last 6 months, while 65% said their energy bills had increased a lot, and 47% said they were struggling with mortgage or rent payments. Of those surveyed, the groups that were most likely to say their costs had risen a lot included Black and Asian Londoners, social renters (from housing association or Council), and those whose daily activities were considerably limited by health problems or disabilities. See image 1.

Image 1 Public attitudes about the cost of living. YouGov poll of Londoners (July 2022)

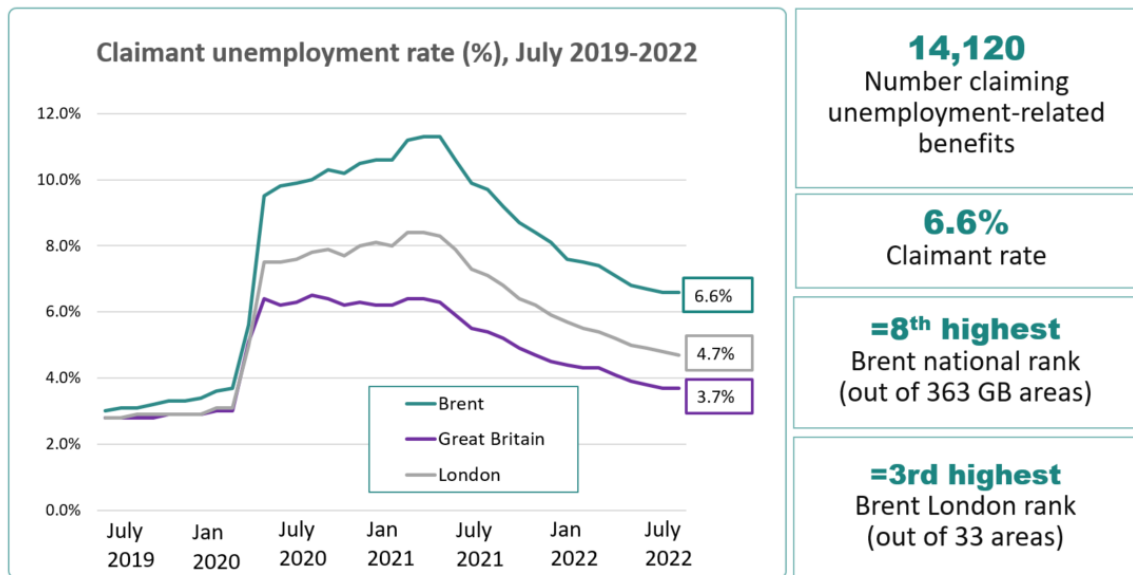


3.3 In 2020, Brent saw one of the biggest nationwide increases in unemployment. Although rates have been falling, recovery has been slow. Currently, Brent has one of the highest unemployment claimant rates in the country - the 8<sup>th</sup> highest out of 363 areas across Great Britain, compared with a ranking of 70<sup>th</sup> in March 2020<sup>2</sup>. See image 2.

<sup>1</sup> Source: YouGov (for GLA). Sample 1245 adults. Fieldwork 15<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> July 2022 – carried out online. The figures were weighted to be representative of all London adults (aged 18+). Data available on [GLA datastore](#).

<sup>2</sup> Source: Office for National Statistics, Claimant unemployment count ([NOMIS](#)). Rates express claimant count as % of population aged 16-64.

Image 2. Unemployment in Brent



3.4 The latest Bank of England forecast has inflection peaking at 13.1% in the fourth quarter of 2022. This is largely driven by the 80% energy price cap increase in October 2022<sup>3</sup>, following the earlier 54% increase in April, and will place further pressures on household budgets.

3.5 The Council has a number of initiatives aimed at supporting residents who may be struggling and enabling Brent and partner organisations to best respond to local needs. These include:

Financial support

- The **Brent Resident Support Fund (RSF)** has been in place since August 2020. In the period August 2020 to 15 August 2022, RSF has supported 4,045 households with a total of £8.46 million. The support provided is for help with the cost of living. This can include, but is not limited to, household bills, arrears in rent, mortgage, council tax, food, fuel, digital equipment and emergency funds.
  - In June Cabinet approved a further £3 million of Council funds for this financial year (2022/2023).
  - Cabinet also approved the delegation of authority to the Strategic Director of Customer and Digital Services, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Jobs, Economy and Citizen Experience, to amend the eligibility criteria for the fund throughout the lifetime of the scheme. This enables the scheme to respond in a timely manner to emerging trends in applications.

<sup>3</sup> BBC, 26 August 2022 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/uk-62633742>

- **Council tax Support (CTS):** 27,597 households are supported through CTS of which 18,999 are working age and 8598 are pension age. The below table represents working age residents. Pension age residents are entitled to full council tax support depending on their income, savings and household composition. The total support given to households is £30m per annum. The current caseload is 27,597 compared to the previous year 27,549.

Council tax Support	Household income per week	Average weekly amount
Passported benefit	DWP/HMRC benefits	£23.73
Band 1	£0 to £80	£23.73
Band 2	£81 to £110	£19.80
Band 3	£110 to £150	£13.34
Band 4	£150 to £250	£8.78

- **Housing Benefits (HB):** The housing benefit service supports 20,528 households. The number of cases is decreasing due to residents moving to universal credit. The caseload in the previous year was 23,568. The total support given to households exceeds £230m per annum. The below table shows average HB weekly awards per tenure type.

Housing Benefits	HB cases in each tenure	Average weekly award
Temporary Accommodation and Bed & Breakfast	880	£307.50
Council tenants-HRA	3,198	£117.64
Private tenants and Housing Associations	16,450	£218.34

#### Food and energy support

- **Brent Hubs** work with residents who find it difficult to access the support they need through mainstream services. This includes issuing vouchers to residents in need of urgent food and fuel support, as well as making referrals to food aid agencies and support schemes for utility costs. Since January 2021, over 6,500 residents have accessed Hub services. Over the same period, the Hubs provided food and fuel vouchers with a total value of £12,400.

The most common needs which residents present with at the Hubs are food and fuel support (23%), council tax and housing benefit (17%), housing and homelessness (13%), form filling – such as RSF applications - (13%), debt and money (9%), welfare benefits (8%), and other, for example, employment, general support, immigration etc.(17%).

- The Government's **Household Support Fund (HSF)** has been used to provide support to Brent households with the cost of food and fuel in the

form of food and fuel vouchers, grants, and financial support to food aid organisations. The HSF is a follow-on fund from the previous COVID Winter Support Fund and COVID Local Support Funds, which had been in place since December 2020.

Between December 2020 and March 2022, the Council distributed £5.5m through these grants to Brent residents. This has included:

- Supporting the families / carers of approximately 12,000 eligible children and young people with supermarket vouchers during each of the school holidays since December 2020. This includes approximately 20,339 vouchers that were sent out from the Council to support families with children aged 0-4 years old who are not attending school. The most recent vouchers to the value of £60 per eligible child were issued to cover the duration of the 2022 summer holidays.
- A one-off payment of £50 in February 2021 was made to families with eligible children to contribute towards the cost of gas and electricity bills.
- £125k in grant funding provided to food banks operating in Brent to support them in meeting increased demand as a result of the Pandemic and cost of living crisis.
- Work is underway to develop an **advisory service to support those affected by fuel poverty**. This will provide impartial energy advice to help residents stay warm, save money and live greener, and will include referral pathways to organisations such as independent advisory agencies. It involves working with front line services (especially those who go into homes) to help identify and refer residents who are in hardship and to develop a central referral point through Brent Hubs. Financial assistance with heating or fuel costs will be contingent on a visit by this team.
- Consideration is being given to the development of a **community shop** model within Brent, which would sell low-cost food and household essentials to families on low/no income. This model is one that has been adapted by other London boroughs as a way to utilise surplus food and household items otherwise being wasted.

#### Employment, skills and inclusion

- The Employment, Skills and Enterprise service help to **upskill residents to support them moving into work**. This includes 4,831 qualifications via Brent Start (ESOL, English, Maths & Digital Skills) from September 2021 to date, digital equipment loans, and financial support toward childcare. In the financial year 2021-22 Brent Works job brokerage service exceeded all targets:
  - Placed 136 residents into full time employment
  - 71% sustained for 26 weeks or more
  - 80% at London Living Wage or above
  - 50 residents into apprenticeships and
  - 100 young people placed into paid Kickstart opportunities

- The delivery of a number of Borough Plan funded **Financial Inclusion projects**. This includes a financial capability upskilling programme targeting community leaders, training to upskill Brent Hubs staff and residents in debt management, as well as the delivery of a financial inclusion learning programme for residents. Up to 340 residents and community leaders, have been supported through this programme with further work ongoing.
- To improve **digital skills** the council has committed to having 500 digital champions by 2025. As of July 2022, there are 108 Digital Champions in Brent and we are on track to meet our target. This includes having trained digital champions within Brent Hubs, libraries, customer services, and the voluntary sector and within housing partners. All Digital Champions are given access to the Digital Unite platform where they must complete essential training as well as explore more specific training that relates to the services they provide. The champions are also supported through the Digital Champions Network, which provides space to share experiences and feedback on the training programme.
- **Digital Inclusion** support for over 900 households, including the provision of access to digital devices for 478 Brent pupils, and digital skills training for 100 businesses has been delivered. We also continue to engage with internet providers to improve access to fibre through social tariffs.
- Work is currently being undertaken to develop an approach that will enable organisations to interact on behalf of residents, who are less able to access services via the **Brent Customer Portal**. This will enable recognised VCS groups and advocates to transact on behalf of individuals less able to engage with online services. An internal team has been identified to pilot this approach so that a policy can be developed which can be applied to trusted voluntary and community sector organisations.

#### Awareness raising

- In March 2022 a **Financial Support leaflet** outlining the support available was developed and delivered to all households in Brent to help increase awareness of the schemes and mechanisms available to those who are struggling with the cost of living.
- A comprehensive cost of living **communications plan** is being developed to begin in September. The plan will bring together and promote the evolving range of support available to residents, including how best to access it. A wide range of tactics and channels will be used including: digital advertising, a dedicated webpage, trusted community voices and a prominent feature in the autumn edition of Your Brent Magazine, delivered to every household in the borough. Learning from ongoing community engagement work as part of the OBR will feed into and shape the plan; ensuring communications are designed to resonate with different groups of residents identified throughout the research.

## Knowledge sharing

- A **Fuel Poverty Toolkit** has been developed and promoted internally. It is available for all staff to access via the intranet. The toolkit provides an overview of local, national and independent support schemes and agencies, along with details as to how support can be accessed. Thirteen stakeholder briefings sessions promoting the toolkit were also delivered, helping raise awareness of the options that are available to residents to help with rising energy costs. These included briefing sessions for elected Members, as well as services including Housing, Public Health, Adult Social Care and Family Wellbeing Centres and Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) partners.
- Five **all-staff sessions** took place in May and June and were attended by 1,155 council officers. These workshop-style events were themed around the Cost of Living crisis and included videos from staff sharing their experiences of its impact on their service users, presentations and a group activity based on case studies of households affected by the crisis; where staff collaborated in discussing how best to support them. Outputs have been collated and will feed into ongoing development of the work outlined in this report.
- The council has developed an operational **practitioners' network**, bringing together key staff from across the council to provide a space to share learning, collectively review what is working well and to consider how we can improve access to existing support mechanisms, whilst also seeking opportunities to develop new provision where required. The first session took place on 16 August. 27 officers were in attendance with representatives from Housing, Brent Front door, Public Health, ASC, Brent Start and Brent Hubs. These sessions will be held every six-weeks and will be developed to include external organisations and partners.
- Following on from the success of five Brent Health Matters briefing sessions held in May and June, with over 230 participants in total, a new programme of **themed stakeholder briefing sessions** has been developed to take place twice a year. These sessions will serve as a forum for key partners and voluntary community sector organisations to continue to share information about their services, increase their knowledge of the provisions to better support residents during this Cost of Living crisis, as well as encourage networking and greater collaborative working among colleagues. The next set of sessions will take place in September and October 2022 and will include briefings from Council services and key partners including: Brent Gateway, Brent Food Banks (Trussell Trust), Age UK, CAMHS, WDP New Beginnings, Advice4Renters, Citizens Advice, SUFRA NW London, Job Centre Plus.

## Measuring impact

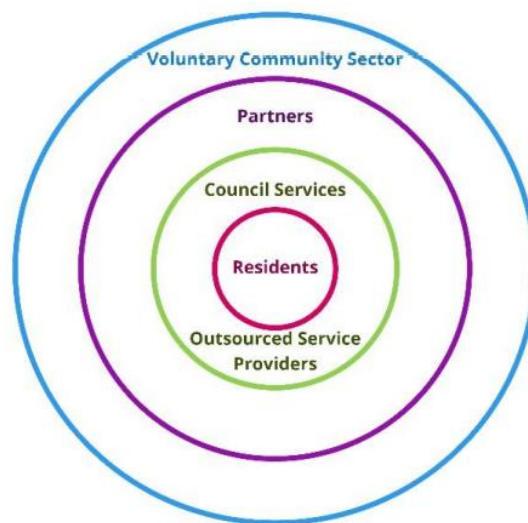
- Measuring impact will improve the Council's understanding of the effects of the Cost of Living crisis on the borough, and will shape how effective collective efforts are in helping to mitigate any negative impacts.
- The main mechanism for measuring impact is a **financial inclusion dashboard** developed by the council. The dashboard was presented to the Audit & Standards Advisory Committee on 1 August and the dashboard's functionality was demonstrated, including the ability for strategic level staff to monitor high-level statistics, such as Housing Benefit caseload, Council tax outstanding and Resident Support Fund granted to support operational decisions.
- Members were also presented with a ward level breakdown of each statistic, which allows senior staff to identify discrepancies between wards and highlight areas for targeted action. The dashboard uses underlying data gathered from our source systems to match and identify residents that are known to the Council in different systems. This provides a more holistic view of demand and helps identify those residents most in need.
- To show further possible developments a Proof of Concept '**Single View**' **dashboard** was demonstrated. This view would encompass more data and build a better picture of residents at a more granular level. The presentation of a 'mock profile' revealed the ability to gain greater clarity on an individual's situation and advise accordingly using the data provided.
- **Phase 2 development of the dashboard** will consider multiple new indicators, which will enable us to target and monitor resources with respect to the Cost of Living crisis. Proxy indicators will be used to allow the Council to make targeted decisions in mitigating the crisis using internal council data to identify residents in need. These indicators will include:
  - Free School Meals
  - ASC Debt
  - Sundry Debt
  - Council Tax Arrears
  - Brent Hubs
  - Business rates arrears
  - Resident Support Fund
  - Council Tax Support
  - Rent Arrears
- Key impact indicators will be extracted from external sources to enable relative comparisons to be made at borough level. These will help to identify potential priority areas where resources could be focused and enables us to track our relative position in comparison to other boroughs who may not have similar interventions in place. These indicators will include:



- Employment and unemployment rates by place of residence
- Average earnings by place of residence
- Universal Credit claimant count
- UK Business counts
- The proportion of households in each Brent LSOA that are fuel poor
- Index of Multiple Deprivation
- Number of adults in Brent who have used the internet in the last 3 months
- Live tables on homelessness
- Free School Meals (also comparable at borough wide level)
- Crime data including anti-social behaviour, burglary and theft

### Local framework

3.6 The above initiatives are in addition to other work being carried out across Council departments and by partner organisations aimed at supporting residents in hardship. They are part of an overarching local framework aimed at improving alignment and collaboration, recognising Council's pivotal role at the centre of the system. This includes health and the DWP, providers of commissioned services and the Voluntary & Community Sector. The system approach works both at operational and strategic levels to build awareness and relationships within the system and to help improve access and deployment of support. This approach continues to develop and will be further shaped by learning from the OBR.



### National Support

3.7 In addition to work outlined above, national support is being rolled-out. On 26 May 2022, the then Chancellor announced a Cost of Living support package worth £15 billion. The Government has targeted this support towards 8 million of the most vulnerable households, pensioners and disabled people.

3.8 As part of this support, package households on low incomes have and will be supported in the following ways:

- 8 million households on means tested benefits will receive a one-off Cost of Living Payment of £650. The DWP will make this payment in two lump sums, the first of which was paid to recipients in July and the second in autumn.
- 8 million pensioner households who receive winter fuel support will get a one-off payment of £300. The Government will make these payments directly to pensioner households in the autumn.
- Households in Council tax bands A-D will be entitled to a £150 energy bills rebate, paid either through their council tax bill or to a bank account of their choice. Brent has approximately 92,000 eligible households, which will all have been paid by the 30 September 2022 deadline. In addition, we have a discretionary fund of £1.2M to assist those in council tax bands E-H that meet certain criteria for this award. The deadline for the discretionary award is 30 November 2022.

3.9 Universal support from the Government to help with energy bills has been increased from £200 to £400; there is now no requirement for individuals to repay this. Energy suppliers will deliver this support to households with a domestic electricity meter over six months from October 2022.

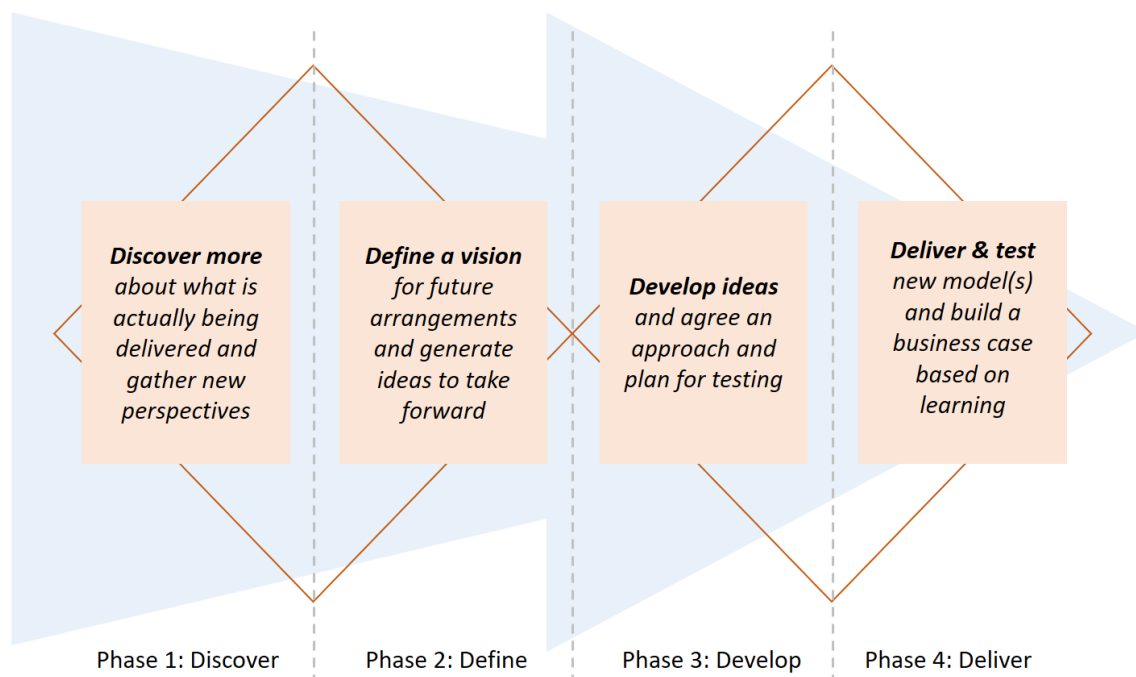
3.10 It was also announced that the Household Support Fund (HSF) will be extended from October 2022 to March 2023. The Government will issue additional guidance to Local Authorities in the future to ensure that those not eligible for the £650 Cost of Living Payment are supported. Local Authorities will determine the eligibility criteria and delivery of the HSF that will be confirmed in the coming months.

#### **4.0 Outcome Based Review (OBR)**

4.1 Considering the challenging national political context and the forecast of further increases in inflation and household bills, Brent's Cabinet, on 20 June, endorsed an Outcome Based Review (OBR) approach to tackling the complex Cost of Living issue and mitigating its impact on residents.

4.2 The OBR approach places the voice of local people at the centre of our response to cost of living challenges by bringing together diverse groups of stakeholders – including residents and partners - to collaborate using design-led methodologies across four phases: Discover, Define, Develop and Deliver.

## Outcome Based Review (OBR)



4.3 The OBR discovery phase began in July and is still in progress – it will culminate at the end of September with a large-scale collaboration event. The discovery phase consists of four work streams:

1. **Community Research & Engagement:** This is a comprehensive programme including engagement of partners, providers, front-line staff and current and potential service users. Approaches, including ethnographic interviews (i.e. in-depth, 1-2 hour conversations with residents to understand their history, circumstances, experiences and related emotions) and focus groups to help gather insights and new perspectives on the issue are being used.

This work stream launched with a kick-off session for Members on 18 July. This included briefings, presentations, and opportunities for Members to share experiences to help shape the community engagement approach. Members provided feedback of what they had seen locally and suggested engaging with specific cohorts of residents and the voluntary and community sector organisations that support them.

To date the OBR has engaged with a wide range of stakeholders/groups including residents, charities, community groups, food banks and schools; with further sessions scheduled for September.

Emerging themes from the engagement include:

- There is a vast array of formal/informal support mechanisms in place for residents who are experiencing financial difficulty; however, these are

not collated in a coherent system. There is an opportunity to have a greater impact on resident outcomes through a more consolidated system/approach.

Example feedback from engagement work:

*“There needs to be better networking structure across organisations for improved joined up working. And better signposting - to be aware of what’s out there/where to send people and get it right the first time.” (VCS partner)*

- Some residents experience barriers when accessing support through the system. This could be for a number of reasons – lack of awareness/motivation, perceived stigma, digital exclusion, less able to seek support, disproportionately affected by the crisis.

Example feedback from engagement work:

*“There are issues with accessing services when faced with a language barrier or little / no knowledge of what you are eligible for.” (School)*

- A number of residents are experiencing financial crisis for the first time.

Example feedback from engagement work:

*“There has been a real increase with a slight delay effect, we saw more people in June, and have received new referrals with people who have not accessed the food bank before.”(VCS partner)*

*“The Hubs are seeing an increase in the newly in need.”(Council officer)*

- There may be a significant negative impact on mental health and wellbeing.

Example feedback from engagement work:

*“I’m working very hard. Not being able to support my family doesn’t make me feel good” (Local resident)*

- There may also be gaps in the system.

Example feedback from engagement work:

*“Residents in temporary accommodation or with no recourse to public funds tend to fall between gaps.” (VCS organisation)*

2. **Data Analysis:** This includes developing insights from sources including: the London attitude survey, staff survey, resident profiles, resident attitude survey, service data and national data sets. Key indicators are being identified and mapped, including to LSOA area where possible, to provide a geographic visual representation of the effects of the Cost of Living crisis on residents. A range of indicators will be used to understand the impacts of the Cost of Living crisis on different groups, providing insights that will help with modelling and forecasting for the future.

3. **Horizon Scanning:** This includes desktop research into work by other local authorities, published research, participation at London-wide forums, as well as using the Cost of Living LGA Hub<sup>4</sup> to inform the wider context. Examples include:
- **Islington Council** - providing a £150 payment to meet the costs of school uniform for children who are eligible for Free School Meals and moving from year 6 to secondary school.
  - **Lewisham Council** – Evelyn Community Shop, 70 households pay a £3.50 membership fee per week for food they can collect from the shop for the week.
  - **Lambeth** – created an easy use portal with social start up Lightning Reach, which allows residents to create a single profile to find and apply for a personalised range of grants and other support across multiple providers.
4. **Service Mapping:** This work stream is building a picture of local and neighbourhood offers, including those not already captured by the Community Directory e.g. school uniform swap shops, one-off community initiatives / events. It is linking with engagement of residents and partners to utilise their local knowledge and will help to identify best practice and gaps in provision.
- 4.4 The four discovery phase work streams above will continue to progress throughout September, during which the key findings outputs from all work will be synthesised and further developed.
- 4.5 A large-scale stakeholder event, called a ‘visioning day’, is scheduled for 29 September. At this event, the products of the discovery work will be played-back and presented to attendees - including partners, members, residents and Brent leads. Facilitation will encourage attendees to generate ideas for new solutions and approaches that respond to the key issues and recurring themes identified in the discovery work and jointly developed at the visioning day.
- 4.6 The consensus of the best and most viable ideas – for example, proposals for new solutions, services and ways of collaborative working – will be agreed at the visioning day. These ideas will then be tested and evaluated from October 2022 onwards and, where successful, developed further with partners and other key stakeholders into full pilots / permanent models.
- 4.7 Over the coming weeks, and ahead of the visioning day on 29 September, work across all four work streams of the discovery phase will continue. Further ethnographies, presentations at forums and focus groups will take place. Targeted work will take place to ensure the OBR engages with further cohorts of residents and partners to ensure the voice and needs of all local people is captured in the products for the visioning day.

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<sup>4</sup> Local Government Association, Cost of living hub: <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/safer-and-more-sustainable-communities/cost-living-hub>

## **5.0 Financial Implications**

- 5.1 In 2021/22 £3m was allocated to the RSF. A further £3m has been allowed for 2022/23 and will be funded from corporate reserves. The fund will be closely monitored during the year as part of the quarterly budget monitoring arrangements. Any further funding to the RSF beyond this allocation will need to form part of the budget setting process in 2023/24.

## **6.0 Legal Implications**

- 6.1 The Council's Resident Support Fund is a discretionary fund that is funded by the Council. The Resident Support Fund replaced the Local Welfare Assistance Scheme after that latter scheme was no longer funded by central government. The Council has received funding from central Government under a number of schemes that were created during the pandemic, including the Household Support Fund (HSF), which has been extended to March 2023. Some of the funding from the HSF has been used to top up the Resident Support Fund.
- 6.2 The Council's Council Tax Support Scheme (also known as the Council Tax reduction scheme) was approved by Full Council on 25 November 2019 and came into effect in April 2020. The said scheme was slightly amended by Full Council on 24 February 2022 for the 2022/23 financial year to take into account decisions made by central government regarding the implementation of the energy grant payment for the 2022/23 financial year.
- 6.3 The General Power of Competence was introduced by the Localism Act 2011 and in simple terms, it gives local authorities the power to do anything an individual can do provided it is not prohibited by other legislation.
- 6.4 Legal advice will be provided in relation to individual projects as and when necessary and appropriate, in particular in the event that the Government may provide additional financial assistance to residents and businesses which are likely to be administered by local authorities and the provision of any further statutory guidance that is provided by the Government.

## **7.0 Equality Implications**

- 7.1 Equality implications will be considered for individual projects at the appropriate time.

## **8.0 Consultation with Ward Members and Stakeholders**

- 8.1 Consultation on specific projects will be carried out when and where appropriate. The Lead Member with responsibility for the work of this service area will be kept informed about this plan and its delivery.

Related Document:  
Cabinet Report Cost of Living Crisis June 2022

**Report sign off:**

*Peter Gadsdon*

Corporate Director of Resident Services