



Questions from the Opposition and Other Non-Cabinet Members

Full Council – 18 September 2023

1. Question from Councillor Gbajumo to Councillor Grahl (Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Schools)

Given some of the challenges that have faced our young people in recent years, which include the global pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, please could the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools outline how our exam results compare to others nationally, and the steps we are taking to support our young people with attainment.

Response:

The 2022 Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 results were either above or in line with national. Similarly, GCSE results and A Level results in 2022 across Brent secondary schools were above national. Despite a national reduction in the award of higher grades in 2023, the provisional results, that could be subject to change, indicate that Brent young people have again achieved above national performance in both GCSE and A Level qualifications, with 30.8% of A Levels graded A*-A compared to 26.5% nationally. The provisional GCSE results indicate that 74.2% of Brent passes were graded 9 to 4 (a standard pass) compared to 67.8% nationally and 61% were graded 9 to 5 (a strong pass) compared to 52.2% nationally. The difference between Brent grades and national grades has widened in 2023.

The latest provisional data is not yet available for full analysis of performance by groups of young people. However, the local authority is continuing to work with schools to raise the attainment of underachieving groups of children and young people, including boys of black heritage and children with SEND. This includes funding 'Leading From the Top' training for all headteachers in Brent that focuses on ensuring an inclusive approach to education.

The overall effectiveness of Brent schools is very strong with 98.8 per cent of Brent schools currently judged good or outstanding by Ofsted. Brent is well above the national average of 87 per cent and above the London average of 93 per cent. This means that 99.9 per cent of pupils attend a school that is good or outstanding.

In line with the Borough Plan 2023-2027 the local authority is committed to supporting children to have the best start in life. This includes the Setting and School Effectiveness Service providing support and challenge to community schools to ensure that they are offering an appropriate curriculum and delivering quality first teaching to the benefit of all pupils. The local authority also works in

partnership with local academies and the Brent Schools Partnership, that delivers training and support to schools in a self-improving system, to ensure the quality of local provision. Through the Setting and School Effectiveness Partnership Board, chaired by the Corporate Director for Children and Young People, schools and the local authority together set the local school improvement agenda.

The local authority also supports nursery schools and early years providers through both a training offer and specialist support to ensure local early years provision is of high quality and inclusive. This investment in Brent's very youngest children will have a positive impact on young children's future life chances.

Despite a national trend of lower grades, fuelled in part by a change back to pre-pandemic grading protocols, Brent's young people have excelled and again produced a set of results well above the national average. I would like to congratulate our young people who have shown resilience and determination during a time of significant hardship.

2. Question from Councillor Long to Councillor Nerva (Cabinet Member for Public Health & Adult Social Care):

I understand that Centene is exiting the UK market and is in the process of selling its UK GP clinics and hospitals. There are several GP practices in Brent owned by Centene / Operose.

Please could the Cabinet Member for Public Health and Adult Social Care let me know the impact will this have on patients and staff in the borough.

Response:

Currently the company is seeking a buyer and we await the outcomes of this process.

There is no impact on the two GP practices in Brent currently. If there is no successor the practices would be subject to a competitive tender. This has been added to both the Integrated Care Partnership (Borough) and Integrated Care Board (NW London) risk registers and will be monitored at Primary Care Executive (PCEG) on an ongoing basis should the position change and require further action.

3. Question from Councillor Dixon to Councillor Krupa Sheth (Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure & Climate Action)

As you will know, there have been concerns raised by residents about the recent move to RingGo for parking permits in the borough.

Can the Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure and Climate Action please tell me what measures the Council has put in place to address these concerns.

Response:

New contracts with NSL for Parking Enforcement and RingGo for permits commenced on 4 July. The new RingGo permit system replaces DASH which had been in use for over 10 years, but it is no longer supported and therefore caused technical issues when migrating data to the new provider at the end of their contract.

RingGo provide permit services to a number of London boroughs including Waltham Forest, Merton, Croydon, Hammersmith and Fulham, Richmond and Islington and have over 19 million registered users in the UK.

The contract commenced on 4th July 2023 and benefits include:

- A modern permit system with easy accessibility via the app, mobile phone or landline.
- Residents only need to pay for visitor parking when needed, rather than book 5 sessions, and vehicle registration numbers can be changed within 15 minutes if entered incorrectly.
- Residents have the option of receiving confirmation of booking and reminders when their permit will expire.
- Resident and business permit holders receive reminder emails 14 and 7 days in advance of their permits expiring.
- Continuity of previous on-street pay by phone parking services RingGo have been providing since 2010 with new improved on-street signage provided free of charge.

To support the transition to the new RingGo permit system, the Council:

- Published information and guidance on the Council's website the week before the new contract went live.
- Emailed circa 53,000 account holders to explain the changes to the permit system on 6th July, once data was received from the previous provider, DASH.
- Met weekly with RingGo to address any emerging system issues as quickly as possible.
- Regularly review and improve information on the council's website parking pages, including updating FAQ's and providing videos explaining how to set up an account and purchase permits.

- Arranged for RingGo to provide training sessions for both Brent and NSL staff on the permit system. NSL also provided additional support from their national call centres by staff that are familiar with RingGo system used in Waltham Forest.
- Emailed circa 13,500 account holders with unused visitor credits on 12th July advising that they would be reimbursed within 10 working days for any unused visitor credits, at the current charge rates (£1.75 for 2 hours, £3.50 for 4 hours, or £5.25 for all day parking), along with a complimentary all day parking permit credit for the inconvenience.
- Issued post office refunds on 25th July, within the 10 working days stated.
- Emailed 26,420 account holders on 15 August to advise of their virtual permit expiry date, as although data was transferred and enforcement officers were able to see these permits, only permits purchased in RingGo are visible to residents on the new permit system.

The Council apologises for any inconvenience caused and continues to prioritise supporting residents and businesses. Volumes of enquiries have been steadily reducing as more and more residents set up their RingGo account and purchase permits. Permit sales are now at expected levels.

Residents can find information on the council's website by visiting: <https://www.brent.gov.uk/parking-roads-and-travel/parking> or request assistance by calling our Parking line on 020 8290 8300 (option 2 or 3) or by emailing parking.permits@brent.gov.uk

4. Question from Councillor Maurice to Councillor Knight (Cabinet Member for Housing, Homelessness and Renters Security):

Kenton residents and local schools have been alarmed by the presence of rough sleepers in Woodcock Park in the north of the borough for over 2 years. It has been the subject of numerous Safer Neighbourhood Team (SNT) meetings and emails to the Council outlining safeguarding concerns but to no avail. I understand that the rough sleeper group may have offered accommodation, which for one reason or another was rejected.

St. Luke's Hospice staff have also reported being disturbed by these rough sleepers which has affected the quality of care for their 'end of life' patients. Residents advise that they are being fed and 'minded' by persons unknown. I understand that when issues with rough sleepers were highlighted in Gladstone Park the Brent SNT Borough Coordinator was able to arrange for these to be addressed within two days.

Could the Cabinet Member for Housing, Homelessness and Renters Security outline the steps officers are now taking to permanently address the concerns in relation to the Woodcock Park rough sleepers.

Response:

Generally, all rough sleepers are engaged by the Rough Sleeper Outreach Team, commissioned through St Mungo's. The Outreach Team will offer accommodation via various accommodation pathways, dependent on the individual's needs and availability of beds. However, not all rough sleepers engage with the Outreach Team, due to mental health or other issues. Also, not all rough sleepers are eligible for assistance under homelessness legislation due to their immigration status in the UK. We only have 2 bed spaces for non eligible rough sleepers, in the rapid assessment hub in Willesden Green.

With regards to the rough sleepers in Woodcock Park, I can confirm the following

- There are 2 rough sleepers in tents in the park.
- Both are Romanian nationals and therefore require EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) registration, to stay in the UK.
- Neither has EUSS status in the UK – so are not eligible for housing services.
- The Outreach Team have ascertained that one is planning to return to Romania next week, however St Mungo's have not seen a travel ticket to confirm.
- The second is engaging with his immigration advice process, and there is a high chance that he is likely to receive EUSS status in the UK.
- In the meantime he will be offered one of the bed spaces for non eligible rough sleepers once a bed is available.

5. Question from Councillor Georgiou to Councillor Knight (Cabinet Member for Housing, Homelessness and Renters Security):

There has been considerable confusion in recent months about the Council's position on Shared Ownership housing schemes. Too often this housing model is lumped together under the umbrella term '*Affordable Housing*', which is an insult to those who are trapped in these schemes that are causing so many in our borough and across the country financial and mental misery.

Conflicting statements and decisions by the Labour Administration have fuelled this confusion. For example, at a Brent Cabinet meeting on 17th July 2023 the decision was made to '*dispose*' of 23 Shared Ownership Units in Alperton. In the report, '*Release of 23 Shared Ownership Homes*' it is acknowledged that the '*appetite and demand for these homes*' is '*reducing*' and that the Council did not have the '*knowledge, experience and the capacity*' to '*effectively sell and manage*' Shared Ownership. However, on the same day, just an hour before in the General Purposes Committee, the decision to approve the Stopping Up Order for works to commence at Watling Gardens was taken. Within the Watling Gardens scheme the Council would be allowing the conversion of 24 units into Shared Ownership. So, on the one hand, the Council are seeking to '*dispose*' of Shared Ownership units that they cannot manage and there is little demand for in Brent and on the other the Council is building even more of this unit type.

Publicly, the Council has offered conflicting statements on Shared Ownership schemes, particularly in relation to affordability for Brent residents. In a Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee in November 2022, the then Brent Chief Executive was explicit in response to questions I asked around Shared Ownership, confirming that these units are '*not genuinely affordable*'.

Can the Cabinet Member for Housing, Homelessness and Renters Security therefore

- (1) Advise what is the difference between the Shared Ownership Units at the Grand Union scheme in Alperton and at Watling Gardens?
- (2) Advise how will the Council be able to manage the Shared Ownership units at Watling Gardens but were not able to do this at Grand Union in Alperton.
- (3) Confirm the Council has no plans to sell the Shared Ownership units at Watling Gardens or other Council managed schemes in the borough to a Housing Association or Registered Provider.
- (4) Confirm whether the Administration stands by the very clear and unequivocal statement made by the previous Chief Executive in relation to Shared Ownership.
- (5) Outline whether it is felt Shared Ownership Units are genuinely affordable for Brent residents.

Response:

Question (1) Decisions for individual sites are taken on a case-by-case basis and reflect the market at the time, housing demand and viability challenges impacting each site. It is not possible therefore to compare the Shared Ownership Homes at Grand Union and those at Watling Gardens.

Question (2) The shared ownership homes in Watling Gardens are not due until 2025 and as mentioned any decisions on management of these homes are taken on a case-by-case basis. Again, this could be dictated by the market.

Question (3) There are currently no plans to sell the Shared Ownership homes at Watling Gardens.

Question (4) The Administrations priority remains to provide social housing to the many households on the Housing Waiting list or dealing with overcrowding. This is a very different group of people to those looking to purchase a home. The small number of shared ownership homes being delivered by the Council are solely to protect the financial viability of the scheme and safeguard delivery of the much-needed social housing.

Question (5) Shared ownership is a recognised form of affordable housing and there are many Brent residents that have benefited from Shared Ownership homes. The purpose of Shared Ownership is to help people on the housing ladder. Shared Ownership targets a different group of residents living in Brent such as First-Time Buyers who otherwise would not be able to afford to stay in London, but home ownership is not affordable for all. That is why as Cabinet Member for Housing, Homelessness and Renters Security, our development of New Council Homes prioritises delivery of Social Housing and we are also heavily investing in raising standards in the Private Housing Sector. To genuinely meet housing need, we need a market of all tenures that provide affordability and a good standard of homes across Brent.