

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

London Borough of Brent

14 – 17 January 2025

Feedback report



Corporate Peer Challenge



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1. Introduction

Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is a highly valued improvement and assurance tool that is delivered by the sector for the sector. It involves a team of senior local government members and officers undertaking a desktop review of key finance, performance and governance information and then spending four days at the London Borough of Brent to provide robust, strategic and credible challenge and support.

CPC forms a key part of the improvement and assurance framework for local government. It is underpinned by the principles of Sector-led Improvement put in place by councils and the Local Government Association (LGA) to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. These state that local authorities are responsible for their own performance, accountable locally not nationally and have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector.

CPC assists councils in meeting part of their Best Value duty, with the UK Government expecting all local authorities to have a CPC at least every five years.

Peers remain at the heart of the peer challenge process and provide a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.

This report outlines the key findings of the peer team and their recommendations. The council will be developing an action plan against these recommendations.

2. Executive summary

Brent is a well-performing council with a positive organisational culture and a good track record of delivery across key service areas. Regeneration and the delivery of new housing is a notable feature of Brent's core ambition. Over the past decade, Brent has delivered the second highest number of new homes in London, with significant developments such as Wembley Park and Grand Union in Alperton showcasing the council's capability to drive large-scale regeneration.

Brent has benefited from stable political leadership over many years, which has helped to foster a culture of collaboration and trust between officers and members. The peer team saw good evidence of an effective working partnership between the

Cabinet and the Corporate Management Team (CMT).

Brent is rightly ambitious in ensuring the council represents, promotes and celebrates the borough's diverse communities. The council has taken proactive steps to advance racial equity, including the implementation of the Black Community Action Plan and the Anti-Racism Action Plan. In April 2024, Brent approved a new Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy and introduced a Corporate EDI Board to provide co-ordination and oversight of EDI activities. While Brent has made significant progress internally, the peer team encourages the council to extend this leadership borough-wide, working closely with partners to tackle inequalities across the community and public sector.

Breaking down siloed working is a key area for development for the council. Greater strategic collaboration across all departments is required, with CMT, Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and managers at all levels modelling collaborative behaviours and promoting a corporate mindset. There needs to be a recognition that challenges within specific directorates are shared council-wide responsibilities, requiring collective problem-solving. This approach is particularly vital for addressing the council's most pressing challenges, such as the temporary accommodation crisis, which demands a holistic, whole-council response.

Brent has set out to reimagine public service delivery through its Radical Place Leadership approach, aiming to strengthen collaboration with public, voluntary and private sector partners to develop a new, integrated model of service delivery. Inspired by the 'Wigan Deal', this strategic approach focuses on early intervention and closer partnership working, to achieve improved outcomes for residents. Central to this vision is the creation of cross-organisational, locality-based Integrated Neighbourhood Teams (INTs), which will share data and local knowledge to identify and support specific cohorts of residents. The first INT pilot will be launched in Harlesden in April 2025.

While Brent is well-regarded as a strategic partner, there was a shared sense among partners that it can be further enhanced through the Radical Place Leadership approach. The vision has been warmly welcomed by public sector organisations and

the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), with partners energised by the concept and eager to move to delivery.

Brent has an opportunity to build on the strong engagement established through its Radical Place Leadership programme to co-produce a long-term vision for the borough's future. While the Borough Plan has traditionally focused on the council's own priorities, the peer team recommends expanding this vision to reflect a genuinely shared, collective ambition for Brent. The council should collaborate with public sector bodies, the VCS, and private sector partners to define shared priorities and intended outcomes for both Brent residents and Brent as a place. This shared vision could serve as a strategic framework to guide investment, service transformation and place-based regeneration in the years ahead.

Brent has a strong record of financial stewardship, demonstrated through the successful delivery of savings and effective financial controls. However, rising demand pressures – particularly in temporary accommodation and social care – have made delivering balanced budgets increasingly challenging. The council has experienced revenue budget overspends for the past three years, including a £13.5m overspend in 2023/24 and a forecasted £17.6m overspend at Quarter 3 of 2024/25.

These overspends have been managed through the use of reserves, but this approach has led to a significant depletion of general fund reserve levels in recent years. As a result, the council is now exposed to a higher degree of risk, with external auditors highlighting this as a significant financial weakness. The continued draw on reserves is unsustainable. It is important the council sets and delivers balanced budgets while seeking to restore reserve balances to a more sustainable level.

Brent's Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) forecasts a budget gap of £28m by 2028, reflecting the growing financial pressures the council faces. The council's MTFS has a short-term focus, covering only a two-year projection, which limits the council's ability to plan strategically for the long term. The peer team strongly supports the council's aspiration to extend the MTFS to a five-year period.

Given the scale of the budget gap and rising demand pressures, it is essential for the council to exhaust all potential efficiency and productivity improvements. This

includes a focused effort on improving debt recovery mechanisms, increasing council tax collection rates, completing the root-and-branch review of council procurement and implementing the improvements to the council's commissioning, procurement and contract management practices.

Brent's change and transformation programme is in the early stages of development, and during the CPC it became evident that there was a lack of clarity and understanding across the organisation regarding its purpose and expected outcomes. To address this, the council must quickly clarify the linkages between the various transformation initiatives, ensuring they are presented as part of a coherent and unified programme with outcomes clearly defined. This includes agreeing on a consistent name and scope, which should be clearly communicated across the organisation to avoid confusion and secure staff buy-in.

As the council extends its MTFs to cover a longer period, a larger projected financial gap is expected to emerge, making it critical that savings from the change and transformation programme are quantified and integrated into the MTFs. The increasing financial pressures facing the council should serve as a catalyst for the implementation of the change and transformation programme. To be successful, this programme must be a cross-council initiative corporately owned by all directors, with collective accountability.

Brent's social landlord responsibilities have become an increasing area of focus, driven by the poor 2023/24 Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs) and the pending inspection by the Regulator for Social Housing (RSH). The council has acknowledged the disappointing tenant satisfaction levels, with one respondent stating, *"it's simply not good enough."* In response, the council has developed a Housing Management Service Improvement Plan and a new Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Strategy. As the engagement strategy becomes more embedded, it presents an opportunity to drive cultural change within the housing service, fostering a tenant-focused approach with greater tenant involvement in shaping and scrutinising service delivery and policy development.

The council faces exceptionally high demand for social housing, with over 33,000

households currently on the waiting list. This places Brent as having the second highest housing waiting list in the country¹. Given this extreme level of demand, the peer team recommends the council reviews its housing allocations policy and carries out a re-registration exercise for households on the waiting list to obtain an up-to-date picture of housing needs across the borough.

Brent is facing a temporary accommodation crisis, which stands as the single biggest challenge confronting the council. By January 2025, the number of homeless households in emergency accommodation had risen to 1,047. This has driven a forecast £15.2m overspend for 2024/25 at Quarter 3 which continues to increase. Given the scale of this challenge, it requires greater organisational ownership, with a collective response to address both the immediate pressures and the underlying systemic issues contributing to homelessness.

3. Recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

3.1 Recommendation 1: Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS)

The council should develop a longer-term MTFS that is fully aligned with its corporate priorities and change and transformation programme. It is important that this is owned across the organisation. The peer team agrees with the immediate need to establish a five-year MTFS, it is essential to integrate the financial benefits of the planned change and transformation programme into this strategy.

3.2 Recommendation 2: Breaking down silos

The council is aware of the need to break down silos. The change and transformation programme rightly targets this issue, but the scale of the transition required should not be underestimated. Collaborative behaviours with a genuine sense of curiosity need to be modelled by the CMT, Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and all managers.

¹ https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/lgastandard?mod-metric=3484&mod-area=E09000005&mod-group=AllSingleTierAndCountyLainCountry_England&mod-type=namedComparisonGroup

To effectively break down silos, the council needs to foster greater strategic collaboration across all departments, sharing the knowledge and expertise held within the organisation. Officers need to adopt more of a corporate mindset recognising that challenges in specific directorates are shared, council-wide responsibilities.

3.3 Recommendation 3: Change and Transformation programme

Recognise the urgency of advancing the change and transformation programme and develop evidence-based business cases that deliver the spending reductions required by the MTFS. To achieve this, the council should:

- a) Quickly define and set the name, scope and contents of the change and transformation programme, and consistently communicate this across the organisation. Bolster communications supporting staff to understand, engage with and embrace the transformation journey.
- b) Develop SMART delivery plans for each element of the programme. Support these plans through the use of the programme management office (PMO) governance to oversee and co-ordinate their delivery.
- c) Accelerate the pace of delivery of the change and transformation programme by ensuring that it is owned and led by SLT with the required grip to ensure delivery.
- d) Establish the programme as a cross-council initiative, corporately owned by all directors, to foster collective accountability.
- e) Focus the organisational development programme on building the capabilities and behaviours required to deliver the change and transformation programme at pace and scale.
- f) Ensure the change and transformation programme is fully integrated with the council's digital transformation agenda and the operating model for customer services.

3.4 Recommendation 4: Temporary accommodation

Addressing the temporary accommodation crisis requires whole-organisational ownership and a collective response to tackle both the immediate pressures and the underlying systemic issues. The council should review all the levers it has to impact positively on this crisis. This may include:

- a) Developing a dedicated Temporary Accommodation Improvement Plan reporting into a structured governance framework to co-ordinate actions across the council.
- b) Looking outwardly, as this is not a pressure unique to Brent, and working in collaboration with partners including other local councils.
- c) Build on initiatives that have already started e.g. 'Find a place you can afford.'
- d) Explore creative opportunities presented by the council's new build and acquisitions programme.

3.5 Recommendation 5: Reserves

Given the depletion of the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) reserves, a medium term programme of restoring the balances to sustainable levels must be a priority. This should include internal communications outlining the reserves position and include explanation of what the ringfence requirements are of the council's Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and capital reserves. The council should also explore strategic approaches to utilising these CIL and capital reserves to deliver a net-positive impact on the council's revenue account position.

3.6 Recommendation 6: Financial processes and organisational grip

The council should prioritise enhancing its financial processes to secure income, improve productivity and drive efficiencies. Key areas of focus include:

- a) Improving debt recovery effectiveness.
- b) Increasing council tax collection rates.
- c) Optimising procurement and commissioning practices.

- d) Consistent approach to business case development to support the delivery of change and ensuring that the change and transformation programme quickly identifies savings proposals of sufficient assurance to incorporate in the MTFS
- e) Conducting detailed unit cost analysis and benchmarking to identify cost-saving opportunities.

To effectively address the financial gap, the council should also invest in improving financial awareness, literacy and ownership across the organisation, ensuring both members and officers are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge and reducing the overreliance on the finance function.

3.7 Recommendation 7: Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS)

Consider a refresh of the Compact with the VCS and health to strengthen collaboration and align priorities. A co-developed engagement strategy, building on the enthusiasm for the Radical Place Leadership approach, would provide a robust framework for fostering deeper partnerships. Additionally, the council should continue its efforts to engage with the full breadth of the VCS sector in Brent.

3.8 Recommendation 8: Shared vision for the future of Brent

Work with partners across the public sector, VCS and private sector to co-create a shared, medium- to long-term vision for Brent that goes beyond the council's immediate priorities. This vision should reflect a collective ambition for the borough, setting shared priorities and intended outcomes for both Brent residents and Brent as a place.

3.9 Recommendation 9: Community and Tenant engagement

Refresh the council's approach to community engagement by conducting a comprehensive review of all existing engagement methods. This review should ensure that all approaches are aligned and complement each other.

There is also a need to embed the new Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Strategy to enhance tenant involvement in shaping the service. The new Housing Management Advisory Board will have an important role in scrutinising the

implementation of this. This strategy should consider areas for improving the service culture and responsiveness to tenants.

3.10 Recommendation 10: Housing allocations and waiting list

Review and update the council's Housing Allocations Policy and undertake a re-registration exercise for households on the waiting list to obtain an accurate, up-to-date picture of housing needs across Brent.

3.11 Recommendation 11: Adults and Children's Services

Seize the opportunity for service transformation within both Adults and Children's services, leveraging the current position of below average overspends.

3.12 Recommendation 12: Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)

Refresh the council's EDI priorities to ensure that activity is aligned with cultural competency/appropriateness and improving outcomes for residents. Ensure that there is a broader focus on EDI across all underrepresented group. The council should also reset its relationship with the staff networks to maximise their contribution in shaping organisational strategy and outcomes. The CMT should play more of an active role in sponsoring and supporting these networks, demonstrating a genuine commitment to enhancing their visibility and influence.

4. Summary of peer challenge approach

4.1 The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected by the LGA on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Dr Lorraine O'Donnell, Chief Executive, City of Bradford Council
- Cllr Peter Marland, Leader, Milton Keynes City Council
- Cllr Baroness O'Neill of Bexley OBE, Leader, London Borough of Bexley
- Clive Palfreyman, Strategic Director Resources (s151), London Borough of

Southwark

- Zelda Wolfle, Director of Housing Services & Resident Engagement, Westminster City Council
- Sonia Grewal, Chief Operating Officer, Swindon Borough Council
- Harry Parker, LGA Peer Challenge Manager
- Shadow peer: Megan Hermes, Regional Adviser, LGA

4.2 Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all CPCs. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities? Is there an organisational-wide approach to continuous improvement, with frequent monitoring, reporting on and updating of performance and improvement plans?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges? What is the relative financial resilience of the council like?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to bring about the improvements it needs, including delivering on locally identified priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

In addition to these themes, the council asked the peer team to provide feedback on a theme focused on the customer experience:

6. **Social housing** – Is the council’s landlord function effective? Does the council have a strong resident-first culture and do leaders listen and take action in response to resident engagement?

4.3 The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. This included a position statement prepared by the council in advance of the peer team’s time on site. This provided a clear steer to the peer team on the local context at the London Borough of Brent and what the peer team should focus on. It also included a LGA Finance briefing (prepared using public reports from the council’s website) and a LGA performance report outlining benchmarking data for the council across a range of metrics. The latter was produced using the LGA’s local area benchmarking tool called LG Inform.

The peer team then spent four days onsite at the London Borough of Brent, during which they:

- Gathered evidence, information, and views from more than 50 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 130 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders.

This report provides a summary of the peer team’s findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members.

5. Feedback

5.1 Local priorities and outcomes

Brent is the fifth-largest London borough and the most densely populated in outer London, with a population of nearly 340,000 residents. It is also the second most ethnically diverse borough in the UK, with 64 per cent of the population from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. Over 149 languages are spoken in the borough, and 37 per cent of residents do not have English as their main language. Brent's diversity is a defining characteristic of the borough. The council recognises this and has sought to adapt its services to be inclusive and supportive of residents from all backgrounds.

Brent is also a borough of stark contrasts, with pockets of affluence existing alongside some of the highest levels of deprivation in the country. Health inequalities remain a significant challenge, with residents in Stonebridge having an average life expectancy 11 years lower than those in Kenton.

Given the scale of these inequalities, the peer team was surprised that there was not more of a strategic and co-ordinated approach to public health. While there are positive initiatives, such as the Brent Health Matters programme – developed during the pandemic as a model of cross-organisational, community-led health interventions – a broader, council-wide focus is needed. The peer team noted limited reference to the health inequalities and the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) during the CPC, suggesting there is a need for greater integration of public health priorities across all services.

The Brent Borough Plan 2023-2027 outlines the council's priorities and strategic direction, setting out five key priorities supported by over 60 commitments. The Borough Plan sets out how the council works with residents, partner organisations, and voluntary organisations, to best serve the people of Brent.

Looking beyond 2026, the council must consider what a realistic ambition for Brent looks like in the context of its financial position. The growing financial challenges will necessitate a sharper focus on what is achievable, requiring the council to grapple with prioritisation more than it has in the past. This reprioritisation should be carried out strategically, underpinned by a longer-term MTFs and the change and

transformation programme.

During the CPC, the peer team observed a large number of policies and strategies, many of which had been developed in isolation by individual services. This lack of integration has, in some cases, led to duplication and inconsistencies, creating a complex and fragmented policy landscape. As one participant noted, *“at the moment, plans do not grip together and tell a story.”*

To address this, the council must ensure that all policies and strategies maintain a consistent ‘golden thread’ from the Borough Plan, connecting strategic priorities to service delivery plans. Developing a coherent organisational narrative is essential to weave together these various plans and provide clarity and focus. The current volume of strategies risks reducing their effectiveness, making it difficult for both staff and stakeholders to fully engage with the council’s priorities. A consolidation of strategies, shifting towards fewer but more impactful delivery plans, would help strengthen focus and improve implementation. Additionally, the council should be proactive in identifying activities and initiatives it can stop doing, ensuring that efforts are concentrated on what will deliver on council priorities within a constraining financial envelope.

As with all councils responsible for social care, Adults and Children’s Services account for Brent’s largest area of expenditure, representing 63 per cent of core spending power for 2023/24². This is likely to increase with demographic changes, in the past year there has been a 7 per cent increase in residents accessing support in Adult Social Care.

Despite this growing demand, Brent remains in a relatively strong financial position, with below average overspends in Adult Social Care (£400k) and Children’s Services (£1.3m) at Quarter 3 for 2024/25. The peer team felt the council should leverage this financial stability and the headspace this affords it to plan and implement transformative service reforms that improve outcomes while driving long-term efficiencies. And specifically in Children’s Services maximising the opportunity for

² https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/view/lga-research/corporate-peer-challenge-information-report?mod-area=E09000005&mod-group=AllBoroughInRegion_London&mod-type=namedComparisonGroup#chart-59

reform as set out in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools bill.

A cleaner, greener future is one of Brent's five strategic priorities. The council has an established Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy, setting ambitious objectives, including to do all that is reasonable in its gift to aim for carbon neutrality for the borough and achieve an average Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) B rating for all council owned housing stock, by 2030.

The council has implemented several climate initiatives, such as the Green Neighbourhoods project and the Brent Environmental Network, which have supported community engagement and localised sustainability efforts. The peer team encourages the council to continue building on these programmes, integrating climate action into all business-as-usual activities to ensure sustainability is a core priority across the council's operations. Good examples of this include embedding a 'Climate Change and Environmental Considerations' section within every committee report.

However, funding remains a significant challenge. Since 2020, Brent has secured nearly £11m in external climate grants, but this remains well below the level required to meet carbon neutrality by 2030. Given the council's wider financial pressures, the feasibility of aiming for these ambitions should be reassessed.

Brent has a rich and diverse cultural landscape, home to world-renowned venues such as Wembley Stadium and Wembley Arena, alongside a thriving community-led arts and heritage scene. In 2020, Brent was named the Greater London Authority's (GLA) London Borough of Culture, an achievement that highlighted the breadth and depth of the borough's cultural offer. While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted planned events, the initiative fostered a co-ordinated, council-wide effort to enhance cultural engagement. Brent's recent designation as an Arts Council England Priority Place and its status as a National Lottery Heritage Fund Area of Focus further demonstrate its growing recognition as a cultural hub.

There remains an opportunity to strengthen Brent's cultural strategy further. A 2023 'future culture provision' peer challenge highlighted similar findings to this CPC, particularly the absence of a coherent visitor offer and the potential to better position

'Destination Brent'.

5.2 Performance

Brent's performance management framework monitors progress through a suite of key performance indicators (KPIs), measuring delivery against Borough Plan commitments. Performance is subject to quarterly internal review at the CMT and is also reported publicly to Cabinet on a quarterly basis.

Brent's performance management framework monitors progress through a suite of key performance indicators (KPIs), measuring delivery against Borough Plan commitments. Performance is subject to quarterly internal review at the CMT, is reviewed at regular lead member meetings and is also reported publicly to Cabinet on a quarterly basis.

Following the refocusing of the Borough Plan, the council updated its KPIs and introduced quarterly balanced scorecard dashboards for internal monitoring. These dashboards provide a more user-friendly snapshot of performance, designed to be routinely discussed in departmental team meetings and Cabinet Member–Director meetings.

While the development of the scorecard approach is positive, further refinement and embedding is needed to enhance their effectiveness. Currently, Corporate Directors do not present their own performance information at CMT meetings, with this responsibility instead falling to the performance team. To strengthen accountability and ownership, Corporate Directors should take a more active role in presenting and discussing service performance at CMT and other forums.

As the council looks ahead to the development of the post-2026 Borough Plan, it should continue to embed its balanced scorecard approach while refreshing its KPIs to focus more explicitly on measuring outcomes and the impact of council services. In delivering this, a stronger organisation-wide commitment to routine benchmarking will be key to ensuring performance is assessed comparatively, fostering a culture of curiosity and continuous improvement.

To become a truly data-driven organisation, the council should continue to invest in

upskilling staff with the necessary data science and analytical capabilities. A key step in this direction has been the introduction of a data academy, aimed at enhancing skills and building data literacy across the organisation. While it is evident that there are elements of a performance management culture in place, there is scope to build an even stronger 'assurance' culture within the internal governance arrangements of the council.

Children's Services continue to perform well, receiving a 'Good' rating from Ofsted in 2023. Like many councils, Brent is experiencing rising demand for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) support and statutory interventions. At the time of the CPC, the council was preparing for an imminent SEND inspection.

In August 2024, the Care Quality Commission (CQC) assessed Brent's Adult Social Care services, awarding a 'Requires Improvement' rating. In response, the council established an Adult Social Care Improvement and Assurance Board to oversee the implementation of its improvement plan, which will be key to addressing the issues identified in the inspection.

Despite the overall rating, there are areas of strong performance, particularly in safeguarding, which received positive feedback from the CQC. This aligns with the peer team's assessment that the safeguarding partnerships in both Adults and Children's Services are functioning well, supported by effective engagement across the council and with external partners.

Brent is actively preparing for an upcoming inspection by the RSH, with its housing service – particularly the council's landlord function – representing one of the council's greatest performance challenges. The council is aware of several priority areas requiring resolution – a topic explored further in the social housing section of this report.

Beyond these key externally assessed services, the council's headline indicators, captured in the LGA's [LG Inform](#) data comparison tool are generally in line or often compare favourably with other London boroughs:

Examples of strong performance:

- Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP): 83 per cent of EHCP requests in Brent are processed within the national target of 20 weeks, outperforming the statistical neighbour average of 70 per cent.
- GCSE attainment: In 2023/24, 56 per cent of children in Brent achieved grades 9-5 in English and Maths GCSEs, compared to 46 per cent nationally³.

Examples where Brent is an outlier or performing below average:

- Housing waiting list: Brent has the second highest housing waiting list numbers in the UK. As of 1 April 2023, there were 279.2 households per 1,000 on the waiting list, significantly higher than the London average of 88.8 per 1,000 and the England average of 81.99 per 1,000⁴.
- Recycling rates: Brent's household waste recycling rate stands at 37 per cent, below the national average of 45 per cent⁵.

Overall, Brent demonstrates solid performance in its core services, providing a strong foundation as the council works to address its financial challenges and advance its priority areas.

5.3 Organisational and place leadership

Organisational leadership

Brent has benefited from stable political leadership over many years, which has helped to foster strong relationships between officers and members. The Leader is very experienced, having served in this role since May 2012, and is well-respected by members, officers and external partners.

The Leader carries a very considerable workload. At the time of the CPC, the Leader had Cabinet responsibility for housing, regeneration, planning and property, in addition to his leadership duties whilst covering a temporary vacancy at Cabinet level

³ <https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/lgastandard?mod-metric=9197&mod-area=E09000005&mod-group=AllLalnUK&mod-type=namedComparisonGroup>

⁴ <https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/lgastandard?mod-metric=3484&mod-area=E09000005&mod-group=AllLalnUK&mod-type=namedComparisonGroup>

⁵ <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/brent-reduction-and-recycling-plan>

due to a recent resignation. The breadth of this portfolio is neither sustainable nor desirable in the long term. Positively, the Leader had committed to promptly review Cabinet portfolios to increase capacity and strengthen the distribution of responsibilities. This should enable Cabinet members to take greater ownership of their portfolios, the delivery of council priorities and enhance collective leadership.

The Chief Executive is highly regarded across the council and by partners for her open and accessible leadership style. The organisation has adapted well to the Chief Executive's leadership approach, with positive feedback from respondents to the peer team.

The council has benefited from an experienced and stable CMT in recent years. However, the forthcoming retirements of the Corporate Director for Law and Governance (Monitoring Officer) and the Corporate Director for Partnerships, Housing and Resident Services mean that significant experience and knowledge will be lost. Important recruitment decisions will be required for the new Corporate Director post that has been created after a senior level restructure, which was driven by the opportunities presented by these retirements.

The 2023 staff survey highlighted the need to improve CMT visibility, with only 44 per cent of staff agreeing that CMT members were visible. This is below the local government benchmark of 49 per cent. While progress has been made, including CMT involvement in regular all-staff video updates and facilitating the values workshops in Autumn 2024, further efforts are needed. Strengthening direct engagement from CMT and SLT members with staff at all levels – through initiatives such as increased 'walking the floors' and more face-to-face interactions – will be particularly important during the upcoming organisational restructure.

The peer team saw evidence of a strong working partnership between members and officers. The Cabinet and the CMT meet fortnightly as the Policy Co-ordination Group (PCG), which provides a valuable forum for discussing emerging challenges and reviewing upcoming committee reports. Relationships between senior members and officers are characterised by mutual respect, trust and a clear understanding of their respective roles.

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A key area for development at Brent is breaking down siloed working, which emerged as a recurring theme throughout the CPC. Siloed working has resulted in instances of isolated policy development and fragmented service delivery. Silos were evident across the council, including within services that are designed to enable change and transformation.

The council is aware that this is an issue and has sought to address this through the change and transformation programme. However, the scale of the transition required should not be underestimated. Organisational structures and behavioural changes are required to successfully embed greater collaborative working. This will require curious and committed leadership from CMT, SLT and all managers, who must actively model cross-organisational behaviours.

Fostering a corporate mindset will be essential to breaking down silos. Officers need to recognise that challenges within specific directorates are shared council-wide responsibilities that require collective problem-solving. This is particularly the case for the council's most pressing challenges, such as in temporary accommodation, which necessitate a holistic whole council response.

Encouragingly, frontline staff have expressed an appetite to collaborate more across services, recognising that they are part of 'one council'. However, at present the necessary mechanisms and structures to support this collaboration are not yet fully in place. As one staff member noted: *"we're one council, but it doesn't feel that way sometimes."*

Frontline staff are a valuable source of insight and innovation, with many eager to contribute ideas on service design, efficiencies and cost savings. However, there is a need to create more structured opportunities for these ideas to be heard. The council should leverage existing engagement mechanisms, such as the Forward Together sessions, to hear directly from frontline staff to actively inform decision-making and the change and transformation programme.

Brent has a well-resourced and structured communications function, with its importance recognised across the organisation. The council has an established communications strategy that sets out the principles for its approach.

Communications are carefully planned and prioritised, with a gold, silver and bronze grading system used to determine the level of focus and support allocated to campaigns.

Recent campaigns, such as ‘Don’t Mess with Brent’ and the ‘Cost of Living’ campaign, have been well-received, effectively raising awareness of key issues and reinforcing the council’s progress on its priorities. A further positive development has been the inclusion of a ‘communications considerations’ section in CMT and PCG reports, ensuring that communications is embedded from the outset when developing policy.

While the structured approach to communications in general is a strength, the peer team would encourage the council to retain sufficient flexibility in its approach. The ability to be nimble and develop innovative communications quickly to meet emerging challenges and engage effectively with residents is a crucial function.

Brent is one of the most diverse boroughs in the UK, and this diversity is reflected within the council’s workforce. 71 per cent of staff are from BAME backgrounds – the highest proportion of any local authority in the country. However, increasing representation at the senior management level remains an area for development. The new People Strategy includes a commitment to enhancing organisational development opportunities, particularly for BAME staff, to ensure the council reflects the borough at all levels of the organisation.

Brent has taken positive steps to embed EDI across the organisation. In April 2024, the council approved a new EDI Strategy. To provide co-ordination and oversight of EDI activities, the council established a Corporate EDI Board, chaired by the Chief Executive and includes staff network representation.

The council has introduced a series of plans to target racial equity, including the Black Community Action Plan and the Anti-Racism Action Plan. While there is leadership within the council on tackling racial inequalities, the peer team saw an opportunity to extend this leadership borough-wide. By strengthening its place leadership role, the council can lead efforts to tackle racial inequalities across Brent’s communities and the public sector.

During the CPC, it was clear that the council recognises and values Brent's diversity. However, the extent to which policies and engagement strategies are tailored to reflect the varied strengths and challenges of different communities remains inconsistent. As one respondent noted, *"staff at all levels can talk passionately about diversity but cannot necessarily bring it to life."* A tailored approach, rather than a one-size-fits-all model, is critical to ensuring services are culturally competent and responsive to residents' needs.

While the council has shown a commitment to advancing racial equity, the peer team encourages Brent to broaden its focus to ensure that equity efforts encompass all protected characteristics. The council's approach to tackling racial inequalities can serve as a model for promoting equity across all protected characteristics.

Brent has four staff networks, which are set to be relaunched in February 2025 alongside the introduction of the new organisational values. This relaunch will be accompanied by a communications campaign aimed at raising awareness, increasing membership and expanding the number of Equity Champions. Each network has its own dedicated budget, and positively, they are connected to the London Councils grouping of staff networks, allowing Brent to learn from best practice across the sector.

The peer team did feel though that there was potential to increase the influence of the staff networks. The council should look to reset its relationship with the networks, ensuring they play a more active role in shaping organisational strategy and outcomes. It is particularly important active engagement and sponsorship from the CMT is strengthened to empower the networks.

Place leadership

Brent has a strong reputation for partnership working, with statutory partners describing the council as 'reliable, collaborative and open to working together'. The recently refreshed Community Safety Partnership was highlighted as an example of a strengthened partnership model. Partnership working in general is a strength for Brent and should be maximised to support the council's place leadership ambitions.

The council has set out to reimagine public service delivery through its Radical Place Leadership approach, which aims to leverage its influence to bring together statutory and non-statutory partners to develop a new model for service delivery. This place-based approach is a core element of the council's change and transformation programme, designed to reshape how services are designed and commissioned. The focus is on greater partnership working, early intervention and improving long-term outcomes for residents. A key ambition of Radical Place Leadership is to create cross-organisational, locality-based wraparound services, ensuring that residents receive accessible and co-ordinated support. This vision has been warmly welcomed by other public sector organisations and the VCS, with partners energised by the concept and keen to move forward. The challenge now is to translate this ambition into action.

As part of this programme, the council – working closely with health and local VCS organisations – will launch the first Integrated Neighbourhood Team (INT) pilot in Harlesden in April 2025. The INTs will use shared data, insight and local knowledge to identify and support specific cohorts of residents. The approach will focus on early intervention and prevention, ensuring residents receive co-ordinated, multi-agency support before reaching crisis situations.

The council recognises the need to develop a clear, genuinely shared vision for Brent – one that extends beyond its own priorities to reflect a collective ambition for the borough. While the Borough Plan has traditionally been shaped from a council perspective, the next step is to establish shared priorities and a borough-wide mandate for delivery, working in partnership with the public, VCS and private sector partners.

To achieve this, the council should collaborate with stakeholders to define a medium-to-long-term vision for Brent. This process should lead to the development of shared priorities and intended outcomes for both Brent residents and Brent as a place. A crucial part of this work will be clearly defining what makes Brent unique and articulating a compelling vision for the borough's future.

By building on the strong engagement already established through the Radical Place

Leadership programme, the council has an opportunity to co-produce this long-term vision. The ambition should be that this shared partnership vision can serve as a strategic framework for guiding investment, service transformation and supporting place-based regeneration in the years to come.

Brent benefits from a rich and diverse VCS, made up of organisations of all sizes. There is a shared desire to refresh the council's relationship with the VCS, transitioning towards a co-production model grounded in mutual trust. At present, some VCS organisations have the perception the council views them as a resource rather than equal partners. This highlights the need to move away from a traditional paternalistic approach towards a more empowering, trust-based partnership.

To achieve this, the council should consider refreshing its partnership Compact with the VCS and health partners. Developing a VCS engagement strategy would provide greater co-ordination across the council and more joined up engagement with the VCS. There is a real opportunity for the council to build on the enthusiasm for the Radical Place Leadership approach to harness the strengths and expertise within the community, implementing a model which works with – rather than does to – the VCS.

Brent's Radical Place Leadership approach and the intended refreshed relationship with the VCS are built on a commitment to enhanced co-production in service development and delivery. While there are positive examples of joint working, such as the Youth Strategy, which was extensively co-designed with young people, these remain exceptions rather than the norm. This approach should act as an exemplar for the organisation to meaningfully engage residents and partners in shaping services.

Local businesses and developers reported a positive relationship with the council but expressed a desire for earlier engagement on its place-shaping vision which potentially could leverage further external investment in the borough. To strengthen collaboration, the council may want to consider establishing a structured platform to engage such organisations such as a local business or local developer forum.

Brent is home to several large commercial organisations, many of whom have productive relationships with the council. However, some partners believe these relationships could be further leveraged, particularly in terms of developing income

generation and commercial opportunities.

Commissioning, procurement and contract management are key areas for development. The peer team identified a cautious approach, with low appetite for risk and limited innovation in procurement practices. There were few instances of proactive market analysis, with one respondent noting that *"it's not a language Brent has."* This lack of forward planning has led to rushed commissioning, causing frustrations such as *"everything is last minute in Brent; this is very frustrating and not good for our procurement."*

To address these challenges, there is a need to foster greater professional curiosity and innovation within procurement and commissioning, ensuring that the council takes a more strategic, market-aware and forward-thinking approach. There remains a significant opportunity for the council to secure greater levels of social value and drive efficiencies through commissioning – an increasingly important factor given the council's growing financial pressures.

Positively, Brent has recently brought in dedicated resource, supported by the LGA, to conduct a root-and-branch review of council procurement. The findings from this review should inform a refreshed commissioning strategy.

Both the Leader and Chief Executive hold key roles within the GLA, West London Alliance and London Councils. The council should maximise these positions to leverage opportunities and drive collective action that benefits Brent and the wider region. Brent is well placed to take on a strong convening role at the regional and sub-regional level. One key area where this influence could be particularly impactful is pushing for the reinstatement of the pan-London agreement on private rented sector accommodation for temporary accommodation purposes which would have a major impact for all London boroughs.

The redevelopment of the Northwick Park Hospital is a flagship example of One Public Estate (OPE) principles in action, delivered through a strategic partnership between the council, London North West University Healthcare NHS Trust, the University of Westminster and Network Homes. Other initiatives, such as the upcoming New Horizons Centre, demonstrate the value of co-located services that

provide residents with integrated, one-stop-shop support.

There is an opportunity to further strengthen Brent's involvement in the West London OPE Partnership, engaging with other boroughs and wider partners to build on the successful collaboration at Northwick Park and explore new opportunities for shared public assets and strategic developments.

The council should prioritise a comprehensive review of its community engagement approach and look to strengthen existing methods and ensure these align and complement each other. This includes integrating initiatives such as Brent Connects and the Harlesden INT pilot into a cohesive and effective engagement strategy.

As part of this, the council should assess the effectiveness of the Brent Connects forums. It should look to take best practices from other councils with community forums, particularly around improving attendance and representation from all parts of the community. Additionally, the peer team recommend reviewing the chairing arrangements of Brent Connects, particularly in localities where opposition members hold the majority of seats and look to ensure the forums are politically representative.

The last borough-wide residents' survey was conducted in 2021, with results showing good levels of satisfaction with both the council and the local area. Satisfaction with the way Brent Council runs things increased from 66 per cent in 2018 to 72 per cent in 2021, significantly above the LGA National Residents' Survey benchmark of 56 per cent.

The peer team would encourage the council to commission a new residents' survey in 2025, providing an updated, benchmarkable assessment of resident perceptions, priorities and satisfaction levels. This would offer valuable insights, particularly as the council begins to develop its next Borough Plan.

5.4 Governance and culture

The peer team found evidence of strong governance across the organisation with robust audit arrangements. The governance structure for audit includes both an Audit and Standards Committee and an Audit and Standards Advisory Committee (ASAC). The ASAC is chaired independently by an experienced individual with a finance

background, alongside two other co-opted independent members. This structure allows the council to draw on subject-matter expertise, supplementing the skills and knowledge of elected members. Most of the business is conducted through the ASAC, where independent members and elected members have equal voting rights.

Brent has a sound risk management approach, underpinned by a regularly monitored strategic risk register, which is reviewed and updated biannually by ASAC and CMT. The peer team heard of ongoing work to strengthen alignment between the strategic risk register, directorate-level risk registers, and officer-led risk management processes.

Internal audit has a respected role in the council with a cyclical rolling programme of work. However, an area requiring significant improvement is the council's responsiveness to accepted internal audit recommendations, with only 50 per cent implemented within original timescales. To strengthen accountability and governance, the council should establish a clear expectation that audit recommendations are actioned promptly. Both CMT and the Audit and Standards Committee have a role to play in increasing implementation rates by holding services to account.

Brent maintains a positive working relationship with its external auditor, who holds a generally favourable view of the council. At the time of the CPC, the 2023/24 accounts had not yet been signed off, but the auditor anticipated issuing an unqualified audit opinion. However, the 2023/24 annual report did include a key recommendation urging the council to take the *“difficult decisions to ensure a realistic budget is set for 2025/26 without the need to further draw on reserves”* to meet any unplanned expenditure. This is something the peer team endorse and is explored further in the financial planning and management section of this report.

Brent operates two scrutiny committees – Community and Wellbeing, and Resources and Public Realm – both of which have established work programmes aligned to Borough Plan priorities. The peer team heard positive examples of scrutiny in action, such as the Budget Task Group (a star chamber arrangement of scrutiny members questioning Cabinet members and officers) which provides valuable challenge and

input into the budget development process.

Positively, the council has also committed to evaluating the effectiveness of its scrutiny function against the [Centre for Governance and Scrutiny measures](#) for good scrutiny. However, an area for development is the need to improve co-ordination and foster closer working between the two scrutiny committees. There are emerging proposals to introduce joint committee, subject-specific task and finish groups, particularly on priority areas like housing, where a more integrated approach would enhance effectiveness and reduce duplication. The peer team were encouraged by this proposal.

The council wholly owns two housing companies, I4B Holdings Ltd (i4B) and First Wave Housing (FWH). The peer team found good corporate oversight of the companies, with Business Plans agreed annually by Cabinet. It is important to continue this oversight and ensure continued alignment of company Business Plans with current and future Borough Plans.

Governance arrangements include bi-annual reports to the ASAC, providing the council, as the shareholder, with regular updates on delivery progress and performance. There is also close operational alignment between the council and its housing companies, with service level agreements in place for the provision of core services delivered by the council.

The current loan and financing arrangements for the companies are transparent, with established governance processes in place. However, the council should develop a clear framework for the treatment of any surplus generated, determining whether it should be returned to the council as a dividend or reinvested into the companies.

The council should also review its board arrangements, as three of the five board members are either Cabinet members or senior officers, creating a significant potential conflict of interest. To continue to strengthen governance, the council should consider commissioning regular independent reviews of the companies' performance and governance arrangements. Additionally, it would be good practice for the council to review its governance arrangements against the [Local Partnerships 'local authority company review guidance'](#).

Brent has a good reputation for member development, being the first London borough to achieve the 'gold standard' Charter Plus Award for member development in 2015, 2018 and 2021. The council operates a well-established induction and development programme for members. A member development board has been introduced which meets quarterly to review the training provision and will oversee the development of the 2026-member induction programme.

An example of good practice was in 2022, when all members developed Personal Development Plans (PDPs) with an external trainer. It is important that members take ownership of their own development, with group leaders supporting their members in progressing their PDPs and demonstrating a commitment to continuous learning.

During the CPC, the Leader expressed his intention to redistribute Cabinet responsibilities. Following this, Cabinet members and committee chairs will need to engage in appropriate training to ensure they are equipped for their responsibilities. The peer team encourages senior members to take advantage of the LGA's [Leadership Essentials training](#) and to explore securing an external political mentor from another council.

Brent's member casework system is a notable area of success, with enquiries handled promptly and efficiently. Satisfaction with approaches to handling complaints and enquiries is rare in local government, the peer team encourages the council to develop a case study showcasing this best practice.

Brent has a positive and welcoming organisational culture, with staff consistently describing it as a collaborative, supportive and a rewarding place to work. This is reflected by the 2023 staff survey, which found that 76 per cent of employees take pride in working for Brent, significantly above the benchmark of 61 per cent. The council also outperformed the staff survey benchmark on 33 indicators, matched it on 10, and improved scores on 36 out of 47 indicators from its 2018 staff survey.

The staff survey identified staff recognition as an area for improvement, and in response, the council is reinstating the Brent Excellence Awards in April. This initiative has been positively received, helping to demonstrate a commitment to valuing and celebrating staff contributions.

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Chair: Councillor Louise Gittins

Chief Executive: Joanna Killian

President: Baroness Grey-Thompson

Brent has recently undertaken a co-production exercise to develop new organisational values. More than 1,000 staff participated in a series of values workshops, leading to the creation of five new values:

- Collaborate proactively
- Lead inclusively
- Embrace change
- Be bold and curious
- Celebrate and share our success

These values, set to be launched at the Forward Together staff events in February 2025, replace the existing FREE values, which had been in place for over a decade. The new values provide an opportunity to better integrate them into recruitment and management practices, ensuring they are visible features of the council's culture.

The launch of the new values can also serve as a catalyst for the cultural changes needed to support the council's change and transformation ambition. While Brent has a positive organisational culture, there is a risk of plateauing which could impact accountability and productivity. This moment should be capitalised upon to re-energise the workforce, fostering a culture of curiosity and innovation.

5.5 Financial planning and management

Brent has a strong record of financial stewardship, demonstrated through the successful delivery of savings and effective financial controls. However, rising demand pressures - particularly in temporary accommodation and social care - have made delivering balanced budgets increasingly challenging, leading to revenue budget overspends for the past three years.

The council continues to face significant financial pressures, with a £13.5m revenue budget overspend in 2023/24 and a forecast overspend of £17.6m at Quarter 3 of 2024/25, of which £15.2m is within the housing service. To manage these pressures, the council has implemented mitigations and has incorporated growth into the 2025/26 budget, including a £15m allocation for temporary accommodation.

However, ongoing budget overspends are depleting reserves, making the current reliance on them unsustainable.

Brent's General Fund reserves currently stand at £20.2m, just above the CIPFA minimum recommended level of 5 per cent of revenue expenditure. Reserves have depleted in recent years exposing the council to a higher degree of risk and leading external auditors to highlight this as a significant financial weakness.

The council's earmarked reserves have also declined sharply, falling from £338.8m⁶ at the end of 2020/21 to £134.1m⁷ by 2023/24. It is important that the council recognises reserves are finite and intended for specific, one-time purposes, rather than being relied upon to balance budgets.

While the finance team is aware of the risks posed by declining reserves, this awareness is not universal across the organisation at member or officer level. Given the continued depletion of both General Fund and HRA reserves, the peer team supports the Budget Scrutiny Task Group's recommendation that the council should actively explore opportunities to bolster its reserves.

Brent holds comparatively very strong levels of CIL and Section 106 reserves, which could partly explain the limited awareness across the organisation of the overall reserves position. However, these funds are restricted in their use. To improve understanding, the council should undertake internal communications outlining the overall reserves position, including clear explanations of the ringfencing requirements for CIL and capital reserves.

The peer team would also encourage the council to conduct a strategic review of CIL investments, ensuring they are aligned with corporate priorities. This should involve exploring opportunities to utilise CIL and Section 106 reserves in ways that deliver a positive contribution to the revenue account.

The council's current MTFs has a short-term focus, covering only a two-year projection. While this reflects uncertainty around future financial settlements and a

⁶ [Brent Council Statement of accounts 2021](#)

⁷ [Microsoft Word - Draft Statement of Accounts 2023-24 v002.docx](#)

potential business rates reset, it limits the council's ability to strategically plan for the medium to long term. The peer team strongly supports the council's aspiration to extend the MTFS to a five-year period, ensuring it is aligned with the Borough Plan and the change and transformation programme. The extended MTFS should also integrate anticipated savings and efficiencies from the change and transformation programme.

Brent's MTFS forecasts a budget gap of £28m by 2028, assuming future budgets are delivered without overspends. However, the peer team saw limited evidence of a corporate approach to addressing this challenge. With rising demand pressures, the financial situation is likely to intensify, making it essential for the council to take difficult but necessary decisions to maintain long-term financial sustainability.

Both Cabinet and CMT recognise the scale of the challenge and the need for tough choices. Steps have already been taken, such as the pending savings decision on Brent's council tax reduction scheme. It is important to acknowledge that larger and more complex savings will be needed, requiring fundamental service transformation.

Moving forward, the council must sustain the momentum of making difficult decisions. While Brent has a strong track record in delivering savings, the reality of even more difficult political choices is unavoidable. The council must be prepared to take bold decisions to protect its financial sustainability.

Given the scale of Brent's budget gap and increasing demand pressures, the council must exhaust all potential efficiency and productivity improvements. A priority should include improving debt recovery mechanisms and increasing council tax collection rates, which are currently tracking below previous years.

Additionally, the council should undertake detailed unit cost analysis and routine benchmarking to identify cost-saving opportunities. Alongside these measures, Brent should review discretionary spending to ensure this is aligned with council priorities and to determine what services it can continue to afford.

Brent's HRA faces significant financial pressures, including declining balances, challenges in void turnaround times and increasing asset management needs. These

issues are not unique to Brent, but they require ongoing strategic prioritisation within the HRA Business Plan.

A substantial funding gap exists across the 30-year HRA Business Plan, partly driven by the multiple competing priorities. These include the desire to accelerate acquisition and construction of new council homes, the maintenance and improvement of existing housing stock and meeting the council's climate change ambition of achieving EPC B ratings across all council housing by 2030.

Brent has a substantial capital programme, with £780m of planned investment over the five-year period from 2025/26 to 2029/30. The council has a strong track record of capital delivery, achieving 95 per cent delivery of its 2023/24 capital programme, a level that many councils struggle to meet. The capital programme appears to be well-governed with established frameworks for investment and delivery.

Two-thirds of the capital programme is funded through borrowing, which creates a significant revenue pressure in future years. The ratio of debt financing costs to net revenue expenditure is forecast to reach 10 per cent by 2027/28⁸.

Brent is facing considerable pressures on its DSG, driven by rising costs in the High Needs Block (HNB) and a growing number of children with EHCPs. The DSG deficit is forecast to reach £13.4m by the end of 2024/25, posing a significant financial risk, particularly if the statutory override is not extended beyond 2025/26, which would require the deficit to be covered by general reserves. The council is participating in the Department for Education's Delivering Better Value programme and has secured funding to identify key cost drivers in the HNB and develop a co-produced deficit recovery plan.

The council has a respected and well-regarded finance function, with services appearing well-supported. However, during the CPC, the peer team had described to them an overreliance on this support, with financial queries and budgetary challenges – such as those raised by the Budget Scrutiny Task Group – often addressed by finance rather than the relevant services. There is a need to strengthen financial

⁸ [Microsoft Word - Appendix G - Capital Strategy 2025.26 - Cabinet version](#)

ownership and accountability by budget managers and Cabinet members.

The peer team also noted a lack of in-depth understanding of the council's financial position, highlighting the need to improve financial literacy among both members and officers. To address this, the council should review its organisational development programme, ensuring that officers and members are equipped with the necessary financial skills and knowledge.

5.6 Capacity for improvement

Brent has set a clear ambition for organisational transformation, recognising the need to modernise, break down silos and better equip the organisation to manage increasing service demands.

During the CPC, it became evident that there was a lack of clarity and understanding across the organisation regarding the change and transformation programme.

Although multiple change initiatives are underway, the connections between these programmes were not well understood, contributing to confusion about how they fit into the council's broader transformation agenda. To address this, the council must quickly clarify the linkages between these initiatives, ensuring they are presented as part of a coherent and unified transformation programme. This includes agreeing on a consistent name and scope for the programme, which should be clearly communicated across the organisation to avoid further confusion and secure staff buy-in.

The change and transformation programme should consolidate all existing change projects under a single framework. As the council extends its MTFS to cover a longer period, it is expected to demonstrate a larger projected financial gap, making it critical that savings and efficiencies from the change and transformation programme are quantified. These savings should be identified within the next six months, with the finance team assuring their deliverability. Once confirmed, the projected savings should be integrated into the MTFS from 2026/27 onwards and clearly outlined in an updated change and transformation programme.

To ensure effective delivery, SMART delivery plans are needed for each element of

the programme. The council should leverage its PMO to oversee and co-ordinate these efforts, ensuring that all priority improvement plans across the organisation are integrated into a unified transformation agenda.

Internal governance structures have been established for the existing change and transformation programme workstreams, with each assigned a Senior Responsible Officer and overseen by an overarching Delivery Board. However, as the change and transformation programme is further clarified, the internal governance arrangements should be reviewed to ensure they are lean while still maintaining robust accountability. Additionally, there is a need to improve member oversight of the programme, which is currently lacking.

The peer team would also highlight the need to re-emphasise the accountability of the SLT and senior managers in understanding, communicating and inspiring the delivery of the change and transformation programme. For the transformation to be successful, it must be a cross-council initiative, corporately owned by all directors, ensuring collective accountability.

Overall, there is an urgent need to accelerate the pace of change, driven by the council's growing financial challenges.

The peer team observed that while Brent has a long-standing digital programme, the council is not yet fully leveraging its potential benefits. Although the importance of digital transformation is recognised, there is a need for greater urgency to accelerate its implementation and embed the programme across the organisation. Currently, the digital strategy operates as a standalone initiative and is not fully aligned with the corporate change and transformation agenda. To maximise its effectiveness, it is crucial to integrate the digital programme with the broader corporate transformation efforts, ensuring that technology serves as a strategic enabler for organisational change and service improvement.

Additionally, there is growing recognition of the opportunities presented by artificial intelligence (AI). However, the council needs to establish a clear organisational direction for AI integration, focusing on benefits realisation to ensure these advancements lead to tangible, positive outcomes for both the organisation and

residents.

Brent demonstrates a strong commitment to organisational development. One staff member remarked, “[the council] saw something in me that I didn’t see in myself, and I’ve been able to progress to where I am today.” The general feeling was that training packages were good, with staff encouraged to develop and progress. However, the peer team did hear of some variability across directorates, suggesting the need for a more consistent, organisation-wide approach.

Brent is currently developing a new People Strategy, scheduled for implementation in April. This presents an opportunity to build on the strong foundations, furthering the council’s ambition to become an even more inclusive employer and an employer of choice within the borough. Central to this will be the continued support of initiatives such as apprenticeships, supported internships, pathways into social work and the local Impact Graduate Development Scheme.

5.7 Social housing

Brent has a strong reputation for regeneration and house building, as demonstrated by the place-based renewal of Grand Union in Alperton and Wembley Park. Over the past decade, Brent has built the second highest number of new homes in London⁹. Housing remains a priority for the council, with a focus on purchasing new homes, building affordable housing and improving existing social housing stock. The council has set ambitious targets of building 5,000 new affordable homes by 2028, including 1,700 directly delivered by the council. However, despite this strong track record, demand for housing continues to far exceed supply, demonstrating the acute housing crisis in London.

Brent provides landlord services for approximately 8,500 tenanted homes and 3,850 leaseholders. The council’s social landlord responsibilities have become an increasing area of focus, following the 2023/24 TSMs and the pending inspection by the RSH. The TSMs for Brent were poor and highlighted the need for urgent improvements.

⁹ [Housing completions by London borough | Trust for London](#)

Brent's TSM results were below the London average across nearly all measures. Overall tenant satisfaction with the council as a landlord stood at 51.4 per cent, compared to the London average of 59 per cent. Only 35.2 per cent of tenants felt the council listens to their views and acts upon them, significantly below the London average of 51.3 per cent. Similarly, just 54.8 per cent of tenants felt the council kept them informed about matters that affect them, compared to a London average of 66 per cent.

The council recognises that the TSMs demonstrate a clear performance gap, with results falling below both the standards the council has set for itself and the expectations of tenants. In response to these challenges, Brent has developed a dedicated Housing Management Service Improvement Plan.

Tenant engagement has been identified as a key area for improvement. The council acknowledges that engagement efforts have not been sufficient, with one staff member reflecting, *“the TSMs laid it bare to us that we must improve our engagement with our tenants.”* To progress improvements, the Cabinet approved a new Tenant and Leaseholder Engagement Strategy in June 2024.

However, significant work remains to fully embed this strategy within the housing service. The peer team observed varying levels of awareness and understanding of the new strategy. As the strategy becomes more established, it presents an opportunity to drive cultural change within the housing service, fostering a tenant-focused approach where the voices of tenants are actively involved and placed at the heart of decision-making and service delivery.

It is encouraging that positive steps have been taken and are planned to enhance tenant involvement in the development and scrutiny of housing policies and service performance, and these efforts should continue to be built upon. A central part to this will be the establishment of the Housing Management Advisory Board in March 2025, which will be independently chaired and include tenant representation. The board will play an important role in overseeing the implementation of the Housing Management Service Improvement Plan and reviewing the service's compliance data. Additionally, the board will oversee the implementation of the Tenant and Leaseholder

Engagement Strategy.

The council recognises the need to improve its housing data and compliance information, particularly in preparation for the upcoming RSH inspection. Tenant demographic data in particular needs strengthening, through the routine conduct of tenant audits. This is critical for identifying and supporting vulnerable tenants, with the need for up-to-date policies on vulnerabilities to demonstrate that the service is implementing reasonable adjustments and delivering tailored support for those with additional needs.

Some concerns regarding the quality and flow of data across different systems, were raised with the peer team. Ensuring the adequacy of management systems is important – particularly within the asset management system – is critical to demonstrate compliance with health and safety standards. However, some positive progress was reported with confidence expressed that housing compliance data has improved following the implementation of the True Compliance system.

The council has adopted an incremental approach to stock condition surveys, operating on a five-year cycle with 20 per cent of the housing stock surveyed each year. At the midpoint of this cycle, no systemic issues have been identified. However, in preparation for the RSH inspection, the council may wish to consider accelerating the programme to demonstrate a good grasp of the condition of its housing stock.

The council has recently procured contractors for its repairs, voids and planned maintenance services. This procurement represents an opportunity to improve the quality of the services, with a specific focus on enhancing the repairs service. TSMs highlight the need for improvement in this area, with satisfaction with the repairs service at 55 per cent, significantly below the London average of 64 per cent. Robust contract management by the council will be required to deliver the desired improvements.

Brent faces exceptionally high demand for social housing, with 33,000 households currently on the waiting list, representing nearly 1 in 10 of all Brent residents. This places Brent as having the second highest housing waiting list in the country. At the start of 2023/24, there were 279.2 households per 1,000 on the housing waiting list in

Brent, significantly higher than the England average of 62.2 per 1,000 and the London average of 88.8 per 1,000¹⁰.

Given this overwhelming demand, the peer team encourages the council to revisit its housing allocations policy to ensure it is making the best use of its housing stock to address both current and future housing needs in the borough. Additionally, the peer team recommends the council carries out a re-registration exercise for households on the waiting list to obtain an accurate and up-to-date picture of housing needs across the borough.

There is a high dependence on the private rented sector (PRS) in Brent, with 46 per cent of residents living in privately rented accommodation, significantly above the London average of 30 per cent¹¹. Given the density of this tenure in the borough, the council has made landlord licensing a priority. Since 2015, Brent has introduced additional licensing for smaller Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and selective licensing schemes across the borough. These initiatives have led to the registration of over 20,000 licensed properties in Brent. The focus on ensuring compliance with the Decent Homes Standard in the PRS is a notable strength of the council.

Brent is facing a temporary accommodation crisis, which stands as the single biggest challenge confronting the council. The borough's high dependency on the PRS is a contributing factor, with PRS evictions and a shrinking supply of affordable rental properties driving homelessness pressures. Between April and October 2024, the council received 4,003 homelessness applications, averaging 133 per week. If this trend continues, total applications could reach 6,862 by the end of 2024/25.

By December 2024, the number of homeless households in emergency accommodation had risen to 1,204. This surging demand has resulted in significant budgetary pressures, with the council forecasting a £15.2m overspend on temporary accommodation at Quarter 3 of 2024/25. The situation is expected to worsen, with the number of households in temporary accommodation projected to rise to 2,262,

¹⁰ https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/lgastandard?mod-metric=3484&mod-area=E09000005&mod-group=AllSingleTierAndCountyLalInCountry_England&mod-type=namedComparisonGroup

¹¹ <https://www.brent.gov.uk/-/media/files/resident-documents/housing-documents/landlord-guidance-2024.pdf?rev=8fe228b3c0724e1aa9418f5a54d1355e>

leading to an additional £10.2m cost to the Housing Needs and Support budget. To adjust to this continued financial pressure, the council is rebasing the Housing Needs and Support budget, with £11.2m in growth included in the draft 2025/26 budget.

Given the scale of the temporary accommodation challenge it requires whole-organisational ownership and a collective response to tackle both the immediate pressures and the underlying systemic issues. To mitigate the challenge, the council should review all available levers to positively impact the situation. This could include the development of a dedicated Temporary Accommodation Improvement Plan, reporting into a structured governance framework to co-ordinate actions across departments. Additionally, the council should reintroduce a corporate action plan on homelessness to ensure whole-organisational engagement, clearly communicating that homelessness pressures are the primary driver of the council's immediate budget challenges.

Brent should also continue to look outward, recognising that these pressures are not unique to the borough, and continue to collaborate with regional partners to develop shared solutions. The council should build on existing initiatives, such as the 'Find a Place You Can Afford' campaign, which encourages households threatened with homelessness to seek PRS accommodation independently, while setting realistic expectations that council housing is very unlikely to be available. Furthermore, Brent should explore creative opportunities through its new build and acquisitions programme to increase housing supply and reduce reliance on temporary accommodation.

6. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. The LGA will continue to provide on-going support to the council. Following publication of the CPC report the council will need to produce and publish an action plan within five months of the time on site. As part of the CPC, the council are also required to have a progress review and publish the findings from this within twelve months of the CPC. The LGA will also publish the



progress review report on their website.

The progress review will provide space for a council's senior leadership to report to peers on the progress made against each of the CPC's recommendations, discuss early impact or learning and receive feedback on the implementation of the CPC action plan. The progress review will usually be delivered on-site over one day.

In the meantime, Kate Herbert, London Principal Adviser, is the main point of contact between the authority and the LGA and her email address is kate.herbert@local.gov.uk.