



Questions from the Opposition and Other Non-Cabinet Members

Full Council – 12 July 2021

1. Question from Councillor Parvez Ahmed to Councillor Margaret McLennan, Deputy Leader:

Can the Deputy Leader set out what is being done to support those of this borough's residents whose financial situations have been hardest hit by the pandemic? Likewise, can the Deputy Leader explain what steps this council is taking to help the types of small businesses that local economies like Brent's depend upon?

Response:

Over the past 16 months, Brent Council has displayed an unwavering commitment to supporting those residents who have been hardest hit by the Pandemic. The council's dedicated efforts stand in stark contrast to the government's abject disregard for the needs of these communities. Brent's success in supporting residents is clearly evidenced by the Resident Support Fund (RSF) which has provided emergency financial support to those most severely impacted. This discretionary fund recognises the devastating impact of the Pandemic on many residents' finances and it has helped support households through this incredibly challenging period.

To date, over one thousand RSF grants have been approved which have provided over £2.2 million in vital support to residents. This is in addition to 18 interest-free loans which total £87,300. As part of this, the fund has supported residents with arrears on their rent, mortgage or council tax, and/or debt. In total, over 280 residents have received help with their Council Tax arrears, to an overall sum of £200,000, and almost 500 residents have been helped with rent arrears, through financial support totalling over £930,000. Crucially, this support has helped to ensure that residents are able to remain in their homes.

The RSF has also assisted residents who face a burden of debt that they are unable to pay, by providing almost £350,000 in support to over 300 residents. This support is in tandem to the council's revised ethical debt collection policy and Breathing Space legislation which is providing greater protections for residents with problem debt. These measures form part of the Council's drive towards a holistic way of working that seeks to support all residents, with a particular focus on those who are most at risk of poverty and socioeconomic deprivation.

In addition, with the RSF, residents have been supported to cover increased household costs during the Pandemic. Over £430,000 has been made available to help 540 residents in this way. The fund is also supporting residents to provide essential goods and furniture, such as beds, cookers and fridges. In total, 22 residents have been awarded support to help make their homes more habitable in this way, and this has totalled £15,420 to date. More broadly, 135 residents have received help with other financial support requests, such as to pay for funeral costs or other debts, to a total of almost £115,000.

It is clear that the pandemic has exacerbated the digital divide, and intensified the negative impacts of digital exclusion. To help tackle this, 242 digital packages have been approved, which help support those without digital access, for example by providing internet access and laptops. This package of support totals almost £110,000 and, as a result, 273 laptops have been provided to residents. Going further, unlike many other London Councils, Brent Council reopened its Customer Service Centre and Hubs to provide a face to face service to residents. Once again, this reflects the council's commitment to supporting residents who are in most need and may otherwise struggle to receive the assistance they need.

This is in contrast to the majority of London councils which are yet to reopen. This decision reflects the council's commitment to supporting residents who are most in need, by ensuring that no one is left behind by the recent shift to a more digital world.

Brent Council's commitment to supporting those hardest hit by the pandemic is also evidenced by the work of the Brent Hubs. The Hubs have continued to provide advice and support to residents with complex needs in partnership with a range of VCS organisations. In 2020-21, support was provided to over 9,000 residents which included advice about accessing emergency support with food and fuel as well as help with debt, benefits, housing and employment.

The Hubs also act as a referral route to food banks and offer holistic support to food bank users to help them to move them away from reliance on emergency support. Part of this work includes an outreach service which is currently operating from the Trussell Trust and St Laurence's Larder food banks, making support more accessible to residents who are accessing emergency food support. We plan to build on this outreach approach as well as continuing to re-instate face to face hub services across the five Brent Connects locations and developing a hub offer in the Civic Centre – enabling more residents to access advice and support in their local area. In addition, we are developing a new financial inclusion programme, using Borough Plan priority funding, which will be delivered through Hubs later this year.

Furthermore, since the start of the pandemic the Council have supported both businesses and individuals in order to assist people through very difficult financial times and establish the basis of post pandemic recovery.

In terms of businesses, government have funded a number of schemes largely to support rate payers in the retail, hospitality and leisure sector with direct cash

grants in addition to 100% retail relief which was awarded for 2020-21. The grants are administered by the Council.

In terms of grants in 2020/21 £39.3 million was paid to 1,831 retail, hospitality and leisure businesses. £24.9 million was paid in direct grants to 2,496 small businesses across the borough. This was all in the initial first wave of the pandemic.

Subsequently in the summer of 2020 561 small businesses received £2.8 million of Discretionary Support Grant with the Council deciding how to use the government money to best support small businesses in Brent.

During the period of local lockdowns from October 2020 to March 2021 there were numerous support schemes funded by government. This saw over 2,000 local businesses provided with further direct grants of £22.5 million. Since April 2021 Restart Grants have helped over 1,200 businesses with payment of over £9.5 million. Applications for Restart Grants closed on 30 June, the last payments must be made by 31 July by which time it is expected the businesses supported will exceed 1,600 and the total value of grants made £14.5 million.

Running alongside these schemes has been the Council's government funded ARG (Additional Restrictions Grant), this has been focused on businesses missing out, such as non-rate payers and suppliers to the retail, hospitality and leisure sector. Up to the end of June 2021 1,083 businesses have been supported with a total of over £9 million paid out. From 14 June a new phase of ARG was launched using the last tranche of government money, £2.5 million, focusing on small lone traders and businesses who missed out on Restart Grants for this last phase. The total funding to businesses in the borough so far delivered comes to around £109 million from April 2020.

In order to augment the roll out of grants, a range of supporting measures has also been implemented. This includes;

- Provision of a helpline to assist businesses to apply for grants, providing a crucial services for many businesses and especially those with low digital and literacy skills;
- Provision of face-to-face support to over 1950 businesses to reopen, helping them to adjust to new COVID-19 guidelines;
- Despatch of weekly newsletters informing over 10000 businesses about upcoming training, events and support;
- Delivery of a series of Brent for Business events including:
 - 3 Meet the Buyer events, to help prepare local businesses to apply for £11million worth of live supply chain opportunities
 - a Brent for Business webinar programme attended by 149 businesses during the pandemic, provided businesses with the opportunity to ask questions and interact with a panel of expert business advisors.
 - a "Doing business with Brent webinar" supported 26 businesses on how to bid for Council contracts and sign up to our local supplier list.

- 'Doing Business with HS2' event, encouraging local businesses to bid for supply chain contracts and giving them helpful practical tips to help them succeed.
- 5 online events to help businesses to go green, cut their costs and innovate.

In the current financial year, the Council will:

- Develop and deliver a package of recovery support for small and micro businesses through a £2.65m recovery fund (subject to Council and Cabinet approval) which complements the support provided through the government's Welcome Back Fund.
- Invest in Wembley High Road and Church End in order to pilot work to create two 'exemplar' town centre recovery initiatives.
- Deliver the Community Wealth Building strand of the council's new Procurement and Social Value strategy, which commits to increasing the number of Brent businesses (including small and micro businesses) who benefit from council contracts, in order to retain more of the council's money within the local economy. A programme of work is in place to deliver this and will include more of the Meet the Buyer events and Doing Business With Brent events referenced above.
- A digital skills survey will be conducted with interested businesses to determine their digital skill level and matched to one or more of the following work streams.
 - (a) Bubltown: an online local market place and e-commerce platform, to be run as a 12-month pilot. This aims to grow the digital presence of businesses and support community wealth building. 250 businesses will feature on the Bubltown app and 50 will be given access to a full e-commerce platform. Residents will be encouraged to download the app, to help them to shop local. The offer is not suitable for businesses with very low digital skills or those with low levels of English, however there will be training videos available online.
 - (b) A digital skills training offer which aims to support those with low digital skills and/or low English skills. This training is likely to focus on emails, creating and posting on social media, setting up a website and using third party apps such as Deliveroo. The training will be in person, to acknowledge that businesses with very low skills cannot access online training.
 - (c) The Business Support Fund which will provide 100 local businesses with a laptop, Microsoft package, digital skills training and access to an e-commerce platform.
- The recovery plans will also support key objectives from the Black Community Action Plan, supporting Black businesses and leaders in the borough to build resilience and thrive post pandemic. The provision focused around digital skills and funding for equipment is in response to key needs raised from network groups. These will enable businesses to pivot their business from physical premises to an online hybrid model, which is crucial for survival. The Pop up start-up scheme has also been identified as an

opportunity to encourage Black youth and start-ups in the borough to raise their profile and trial business ideas.

In terms of support for individuals, since April 2020, the Council:

- Have supported over 300 residents into work, apprenticeships or Kickstart opportunities.
- Registered over 3000 residents for employment related support.
- Launched the #KeepBrentWorking campaign as part of Brent's response to post covid-19 recovery, which has supported over 100 business with employment advice and job brokerage support.
- Is operating as a Gateway organisation for the KickStart Scheme and are able to support up to 75 Employers fill 284 work placement.
- Launched the Apprenticeship Levy Transfer Scheme to fund local employers and help boost the number of high-quality apprenticeships in the locality. The available funding is specifically for the training costs associated with employing an apprentice and have.
 - Designed and ran 28 interactive employment focused webinars with local employers, which have engaged over 1,000 residents;
 - Became an official Job Brokerage Partner with HS2 to ensure employment opportunities are accessible to all, particularly those from under-represented and disadvantaged group.
 - Collaborated with partners and employers to run a series of virtual events during National Apprenticeship Week, National Careers Week and International Women's Day;
 - Engaged over 90 local partner organisation from the voluntary, community and charity sector through newsletters and online partnership forums;
- Worked closely with WLA and DWP on The Work Health Programme delivery ensuring we engage and refer residents to JETS and the Work and Health Programme on the Restart programme including holding a Brent Works and employer event in June 2021
- Met regularly with local Colleges and DWP in support of economic recovery which has facilitated joint work on training and recruitment for the Care Sector.
- Delivered Brent Tech Camps, an outcomes led programme focusing on quality jobs within the tech and creative industries, which will support 90 residents.
- Delivered a successful B2B Skills Summit in January 2021 with positive engagement from industry stakeholders and speakers included techUK, Cisco, TfL and Openreach with 110 people attending.
- Arranged a Green Skills Festival (2 day Careers Event) to be held at the end of the year with key businesses with green skills vacancies

2. Question from Councillor Orleen Hylton to Councillor Krupa Sheth, Lead Member for Environment:

In July 2019, Brent Council declared a climate and ecological emergency and committed to do all in its gift to strive for carbon neutrality by 2030. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic and the current efforts towards recovery, can the Cabinet Member for Environment set out how Brent's efforts to build back better will help deliver on this borough's climate commitments?

Response:

Brent Council is committed to ensuring that we are not only building back better from the pandemic, but also building back *greener* and ensuring that we are embedding sustainability at the heart of our plans as a council going forward. Members should be under no illusions about the scale of this challenge - COVID-19 in itself has provided enormous challenges for the council with the economic fall-out for Brent likely be felt throughout this decade. Clearly, this will have also have an impact on our ability to plan and deliver carbon neutrality in the borough by 2030 at the scale and speed we had originally envisaged.

However, whilst these are formidable challenges, there are also significant opportunities from genuinely building back greener and ensure we are not just reverting to the status quo. We will need to think innovatively and radically in our approach to climate action in order to overcome this, but also ensure that the council is facilitating and coordinating all of our key communities and sectors to join us in taking action to achieve carbon neutrality on a borough wide basis. We are also clear that the risk posed by inaction on the climate and ecological emergency, and the long-term problems caused by climate deterioration to the council and our residents will massively outweigh the risk of inaction.

At the heart of our plans to build back greener is our Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy which was approved by the Cabinet in April this year, which sets out the five key areas of focus for the coming decade – and aligns closely with both the environmental priorities provided to us by the Brent Climate Assembly. Tackling the Climate and Ecological Emergency is also present as a key priority of our refreshed Borough Plan, which was refreshed in light of the pandemic and the unprecedented circumstances that the council has faced over the past 15 months. The Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy will contain yearly delivery plans, and there are 23 key actions which are in progress this year.

The council is continuing to make good progress on the delivery of actions from within these themes, for example, amongst other things this year we will deliver:

- A new procurement sustainability policy – which is now live and mobilises a potential £400m of council spending power to low carbon emissions within our supply chain
- We will offer a food waste caddy to every communal flat of over 8 people in Brent;

- Work with United Colleges to provide new apprenticeships and training pathways into the green jobs, and begin support the transition to our desire for a low carbon circular economy in the borough;
- Install 390 new electric vehicle charge points;
- Implement 50 new bike hangars;
- Implement 5 new Healthy Neighbourhood schemes and make School Streets schemes permanent, subject to the outcome of a consultation this summer
- Undertake retrofit pilots within our own stock and implement improved energy efficiency measures as part of our Tower blocks asset management programme
- Launch our Carbon Offset Fund working closely with the community on the allocation of some of this funding
- Develop a Green Infrastructure Vision and Climate Resilience Plan
- And continue to educate, engage and inspire our different sectors and communities through the Brent Environmental Network – which currently has just under 400 members

Tackling the climate and ecological emergency is a fast moving agenda, and we also continue to harness opportunities which have arisen outside of the formal delivery plan to contribute to our overall climate emergency goals. For example, we have secured £3.2m of funding to improve the energy efficiency of 16 council-owned buildings across our estate in 2021-2. We were part of a West London consortium which has secured £4.7m for the region to retrofit homes for those on low incomes in fuel poverty, plus an additional £1m for Brent specifically in the second phase of the project. We have also secured £700k from DEFRA to make Willesden a designated Clean Air Village.

As such, we remain fully committed to this agenda and we must seize the opportunity to recover from COVID-19 in a greener, cleaner and more sustainable way.

3. Question from Councillor Gwen Grahl to Councillor Eleanor Southwood, Lead Member for Housing & Welfare Reform:

Can the Cabinet Member for Housing and Welfare Reform update on how Brent has so far delivered on its promise to tackle poverty, in all its forms, as so starkly laid out in last year's Independent Poverty Commission's findings.

Response:

I would like to thank you for raising this question and giving me the opportunity to explain what the council is doing to tackle poverty. The pandemic has shown how easy it is for events to tip people into poverty. The reality is that ten years of cuts to local services have also left many people struggling to get the support they need.

The challenging external context over the past months has underlined how essential local leadership is in facing crises on this scale. Both in meeting the current situation and ensuring the recovery does not leave anyone behind, tackling poverty is a key priority for the council.

The Independent Poverty Commission based its findings on a comprehensive review of why so many people in Brent experience poverty.

The Poverty Commission report set out the actions the council and its partners can take to make a real difference to peoples' lives, help realise their potential - and make Brent an even better place to live. We have taken the report's recommendations to develop delivery plans and these are overseen by the consultative group bringing together the knowledge, perspectives, resources and experience of the group and drawing on the lived experience of our residents.

Poverty is a complex set of issues that the council cannot tackle on its own.

The delivery plans cover:

- **Housing**
- **Economy and Jobs**
- **Financial Inclusion and Welfare**

Work is underway in all of these areas and is progressing well. We are using every opportunity to tackle poverty working with partners across sectors, teams across the council and our residents.

Our overarching aim is to prevent people from experiencing poverty. Where this does occur we want this to be less frequent and very short-lived. Support must be available for anyone who needs it. Our work focuses on housing, economy and jobs, financial inclusion and welfare.

Housing

- We are continuing to deliver one of the biggest house building programmes in London. The council is on track to deliver 1000 new Council Homes over the period 2019-2024 and has made another ambitious bid to the GLA to extend the current building programme to 2028.
- 262 families have already moved into their council homes and almost 600 more homes are currently being built.
- We are working with Future of London to better understand what it is like to live in the private rented sector in Brent and what the council and its partners can do to better support tenants.
- We have secured funding to increase the capacity in the Housing First Support scheme to 18 units. This means more single homeless people with complex needs will have access to somewhere they can call home. The number of homeless households living in Temporary Accommodation is now at 1,696, a 20% reduction from the previous year. As furlough is phased out and the ban on evictions comes to an end we are focusing on what more we can do to support families who may become homeless in the months ahead.

Economy and Jobs

- The council has rolled out a range of grants and support measures to businesses. This has included £39.3 million to retail, hospitality and leisure businesses; £2.8 million in Discretionary Support Grant to small businesses. Over £50m direct grants to small businesses.
- Businesses have also been supported through training support, including a dedicated helpline.
- We are also helping residents to get back into work through our #KeepBrentWorking campaign as well as supporting 300 residents through apprenticeships and Kickstart opportunities.
- The council is a London Living Wage accredited employer and our ambition is to ensure that more residents have access to good quality jobs.
- We have become an official job brokerage partner with HS2 to ensure employment opportunities are accessible to all, particularly those from under-represented and disadvantaged groups.
- Our Work and Health programme focuses on those who are long term unemployed, creating a support framework to enable them to gain employment.
- At West London level, the council continues to work closely with its neighbours on the 'Build and Recover' strategy, adopted during September 2020, which focuses on developing jobs to facilitate a 'green' recovery, developing plans for skills training, focussing on growth sectors, high value employment and traditional key employment sectors for West London such as aviation.
- The council has been recognised as a Disability Confident Leader. This highlights the work the authority is doing to support staff with disabilities and to champion support for people with disabilities amongst our partners, communities and local businesses.

Financial Inclusion and Welfare

- Brent introduced the Resident Support Fund (RSF) which has provided emergency financial support to residents. This discretionary fund recognises the devastating impact of the pandemic on many residents' finances and it has helped support households through this incredibly challenging period. Over 1,000 Resident Support Fund (RSF) grants have been issued which have provided over £2.2 million in vital support to residents. This is in addition to 18 interest-free loans which total £87,300.
- The Hubs have continued to provide advice and support to residents with complex needs in partnership with a range of VCS organisations. In 2020-21, support was provided to over 9,000 residents which included advice about accessing emergency support with food and fuel as well as help with debt, benefits, housing and employment. The Hubs also act as a referral route to food banks and offer holistic support to food bank users to help them to move away from reliance on emergency support. Part of this work includes an outreach service which is currently operating from the Trussell Trust and St Laurence's Larder food banks, making support more accessible to residents who are visiting food banks.
- A key finding in the Poverty Commission's work was the impact of digital exclusion which has been exacerbated during the pandemic. As a council we are committed to closing this gap including provision of digital packages and laptops to residents. Work continues to roll out full fibre connectivity across the council's housing stock and key community spaces.
- We are continuing to work with health partners to help reduce health inequalities including targeted communication working with local community leaders and the establishment of community champions across the borough.
- Tackling fuel poverty is a key element of our Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy. Hubs continue to give advice on tackling fuel poverty as well as providing fuel vouchers. A new comprehensive domestic energy advice programme and referral network for Brent's residents and businesses is being developed.
- The council is committed to tackling period poverty by ensuring women of all ages have access to suitable menstrual products. We are signposting to organisations who can help and information is being provided through the Hubs.

This progress shows that the council is playing its part in tackling the underlying reasons why people in Brent experience poverty. Challenging times lie ahead and we continue to draw on the expertise of our partners and the lived experience of our residents.

4. Question from Councillor Michael Maurice to Councillor Krupa Sheth, Lead Member for Environment:

From 25 October 2021, the Ultra-Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) is expanding from central London to create a single, larger zone up to the A406 North Circular Road. Petrol cars registered before 2006 and diesel cars registered before 2015 are likely to incur a £12.50 daily charge should they travel into the ULEZ area. This means that Brent residents living north of the North Circular Road with an older vehicle will incur a charge should they use the Household Waste and Recycling Centre situated at Abbey Road.

This will impact those on low incomes disproportionately and potentially result in an increase of fly tipping.

Will this Council make representations to Transport for London and the Mayor of London seeking an exemption from the charge for Brent residents legitimately using the HWRC. Alternatively, will the Council request that Brent residents living north of the zone be allowed to utilise Harrow Council's facility at Forward Drive, thus avoiding the requirement to enter the ULEZ area?

A map has been attached as Appendix 1 for further background

Response:

With an estimated 5.8m journeys every day by car, road traffic in London contributes to around half the pollution in London, making it one of the one of the most polluted places in the UK. London's air pollution is increasing people's risk of heart and lung disease and asthma. Around half of emissions of nitrogen oxides (NOx) come from transport. They contribute to illegal levels of nitrogen dioxide (NO2) and particulate matter (PM) - pollutants that make chronic illnesses worse, shorten life expectancy and damage lung development. The communities suffering most from poor air quality are often the most vulnerable, including children.

To help improve air quality, the Ultra-Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) was introduced in Central London on 8th April 2019 in the expectation it would reduce harmful road transport emissions of nitrogen oxides (NOx) by 45% and make London a safer and more pleasant place to live, work and visit. These positive effects will be especially beneficial to the young, older people and those who have respiratory problems, as well as residents of high pollution areas, such as Harlesden and Stonebridge.

Some residents will be affected. However, there is a clear, pressing, legal and moral obligation to take action to reduce air pollution as soon as possible. Around 72% of respondents were in favour of this proposal when TfL consulted on the scheme.

There is therefore no concession for residents when the ULEZ expands to the North Circular Road next year. This is because TfL started publicising the

expansion to the zone some 18 months in advance and therefore TfL considers there to have been ample time for residents to make alternative arrangements.

If a resident's vehicle does not meet the ULEZ standards they will have options including:

- Purchasing a new or second hand vehicle that meets the required emissions standards;
- Joining a van or car club;
- Paying the charge;

The Council is helping residents by installing a network of electric vehicle charging points to encourage greener travel. We currently have:

- 5 rapid charging points;
- 27 Source London charging points;
- 58 lamp column chargers

Next year we plan to install:

- 3 rapid charging points;
- 76 Source London charging points;
- 110 lamp column chargers utilising grant funding

In summary, the purpose of the ULEZ zone is to create behaviour change to promote better air quality. There is no advantage or benefit in creating bespoke concessions.

Also, the boundaries of the zone aren't determined by Brent and cannot be influenced by Brent. TfL consider their publicity to have been sufficiently timely in bringing the restrictions to the attention of residents who might need to change their vehicle in order to comply.

Access to Harrow Council's waste site is restricted to Harrow residents only and we are advised there are no plans to change that arrangement.