



Co-operative Councils

Innovation Network

COVID-19 Brent Council

Tackling Poverty Moving Forwards

A Poverty Commission was created to find out why so many of Brent's residents are poor and what can be done about it

Context

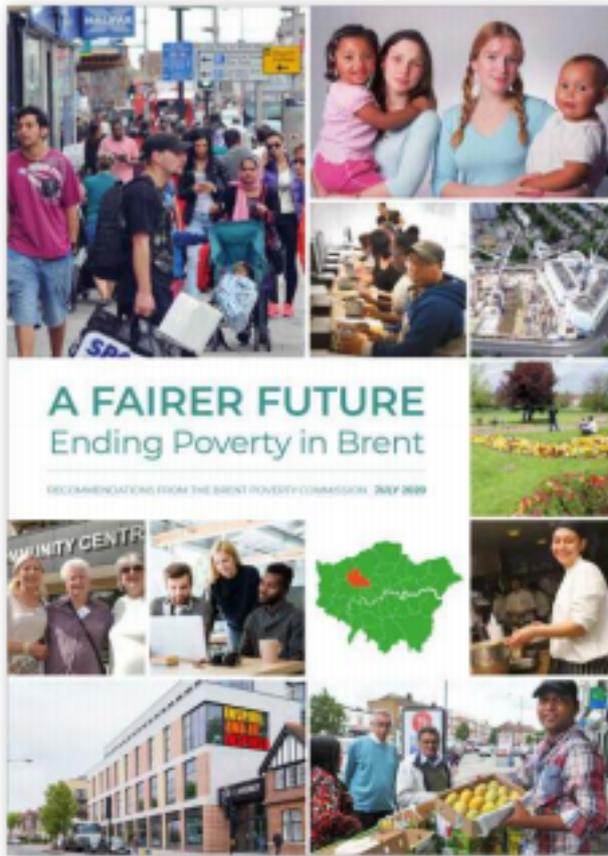
In recent years poverty has significantly increased as an outer London problem, a situation made much worse by Covid-19. The Council decided it needed a thorough understanding of poverty in the borough. The Commission sought to answer why so many Brent residents are poor, what it means to live in poverty and what works to address the issue – and how to prevent it from arising. Although there was a wealth of knowledge within the Council, it wanted to draw on wider expertise and experience of what works elsewhere. And the Council wanted to hear things people might not like to tell it. To meet these challenges, it commissioned the independent Brent Poverty Commission in January 2020. Chaired by the former Chief Executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Lord Richard Best, the Commission included experts and frontline practitioners across London and nationally.

Development

The Commission was deliberately nonpartisan, with representation from the Council's minority party. The Council provided support and set terms of reference, but the Commission decided its own programme. Its work started before the pandemic, but the crisis gave the project greater urgency: Brent was hit particularly hard by Covid-19. It wanted to make sure the Commission's recommendations were informed by the lived experience of what it means to be poor in Brent, and how it feels when things can be done to help people overcome poverty. To do this the Commission has drawn on case studies in the published report. The Chair and Commissioners focused their work on four areas: housing, economy and jobs, tackling financial exclusion, and local welfare. The work confirmed that these issues are frequently inter-related, that those in poverty often face challenges across all of them, and that solutions had to tackle each in as joined-up and tailored ways as possible.

Implementation

The Commission's report, published in August, lays out the ways that rocketing housing costs, precarious employment and a welfare system which all too often puts process before people have combined to drive people into poverty, and make it so hard to escape. Most importantly, it looks at what works and what doesn't, and what could be done better, giving clear, practical and evidence-based recommendations to the Council, the Mayor of London and national Government about how they can make a real difference.



Review

The last six months have shown in the starkest way possible that sharp divides in society endure and that poverty imposes huge costs in terms of health and wellbeing, community and cohesion, dignity and opportunity. The full report is on the Council website at:

www.brent.gov.uk

Lord Best said: "Our report makes a series of recommendations for the Council to pull out all the stops to increase the number of homes affordable to those on lower incomes, including borrowing to build new council homes and maximising gains from planning. We predict opportunities post-Covid to do deals with developers finding sales more difficult, and also to buy back ex-right to buy and other properties from landlords exiting the market in the months ahead. But urgent measures must also be taken to increase incomes."

"The Commission commends efforts by the Council to boost employment, encourage apprenticeships, and equip more young people for the jobs of tomorrow. Using its procurement powers and securing social value from the contracts it places, the Council can support the local economy and can see the London Living Wage paid to more workers who currently get less."

“Brent has seen circa 50,000 people furloughed and not all will return to full-time jobs. Of course, welfare support must come mostly from central government but we set out recommendations for enhancing local welfare assistance, both in this emergency and beyond. And we stress the value of the advice services so everyone gets the help to which they are entitled.”

“In conclusion, I hope the Commission’s report shows that there are real opportunities for all local authorities, despite financial constraints, to make a massive contribution to ending poverty in this country.”

For further information contact:

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