



Corporate Parenting Committee

Wednesday 3 February 2021 at 5.00 pm

This will be an online virtual meeting.

Membership:

Members

Councillors:

M Patel (Chair)
Conneely
Gbajumo
Kansagra
Thakkar

Substitute Members

Councillors:

Lloyd, W Mitchell Murray,
Sangani

Councillors:

Colwill, Maurice

For further information contact: Hannah O'Brien, Governance Officer
020 8937 1339, hannah.o'brien@brent.gov.uk

For electronic copies of minutes, reports and agendas, and to be alerted when the minutes of this meeting have been published visit:

www.brent.gov.uk/committees

The press and public are likely to be excluded from this meeting.

Notes for Members - Declarations of Interest:

If a Member is aware they have a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest* in an item of business, they must declare its existence and nature at the start of the meeting or when it becomes apparent and must leave the room without participating in discussion of the item.

If a Member is aware they have a Personal Interest** in an item of business, they must declare its existence and nature at the start of the meeting or when it becomes apparent.

If the Personal Interest is also a Prejudicial Interest (i.e. it affects a financial position or relates to determining of any approval, consent, licence, permission, or registration) then (unless an exception at 14(2) of the Members Code applies), after disclosing the interest to the meeting the Member must leave the room without participating in discussion of the item, except that they may first make representations, answer questions or give evidence relating to the matter, provided that the public are allowed to attend the meeting for those purposes.

***Disclosable Pecuniary Interests:**

- (a) **Employment, etc.** - Any employment, office, trade, profession or vocation carried on for profit gain.
- (b) **Sponsorship** - Any payment or other financial benefit in respect expenses in carrying out duties as a member, or of election; including from a trade union.
- (c) **Contracts** - Any current contract for goods, services or works, between the Councillors or their partner (or a body in which one has a beneficial interest) and the council.
- (d) **Land** - Any beneficial interest in land which is within the council's area.
- (e) **Licences** - Any licence to occupy land in the council's area for a month or longer.
- (f) **Corporate tenancies** - Any tenancy between the council and a body in which the Councillor or their partner have a beneficial interest.
- (g) **Securities** - Any beneficial interest in securities of a body which has a place of business or land in the council's area, if the total nominal value of the securities exceeds £25,000 or one hundredth of the total issued share capital of that body or of any one class of its issued share capital.

****Personal Interests:**

The business relates to or affects:

- (a) Anybody of which you are a member or in a position of general control or management, and:

- To which you are appointed by the council;
- which exercises functions of a public nature;
- which is directed is to charitable purposes;
- whose principal purposes include the influence of public opinion or policy (including a political party of trade union).

- (b) The interests a of a person from whom you have received gifts or hospitality of at least £50 as a member in the municipal year;

or

A decision in relation to that business might reasonably be regarded as affecting, to a greater extent than the majority of other council tax payers, ratepayers or inhabitants of the electoral ward affected by the decision, the well-being or financial position of:

- You yourself;
- a member of your family or your friend or any person with whom you have a close association or any person or body who employs or has appointed any of these or in whom they have a beneficial interest in a class of securities exceeding the nominal value of £25,000, or any firm in which they are a partner, or any company of which they are a director
- any body of a type described in (a) above.

Agenda

Introductions, if appropriate.

Item	Page
1 Exclusion of the Press and Public	
<p>The committee is advised that the public may be excluded from meetings whenever it is likely in view of the nature of the proceedings that exempt information would be disclosed. Meetings of the Corporate Parenting Committee are attended by representatives of Care In Action (CIA), the council's Children in Care Council. The committee is therefore recommended to exclude the press and public for the duration of the meeting, as the attendance of CIA representatives necessitates the disclosure of the following category of exempt information, set out in the Local Government Act 1972: - information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual.</p>	
2 Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members	
3 Declarations of interests	
<p>Members are invited to declare at this stage of the meeting, any relevant disclosable pecuniary, personal or prejudicial interests in the items on this agenda.</p>	
4 Deputations (if any)	
<p>To hear any deputations received from members of the public in accordance with Standing Order 67.</p>	
5 Minutes of the previous meeting	1 - 8
<p>To approve the minutes of the previous meeting as a correct record.</p>	
6 Matters arising (if any)	
<p>To consider any matters arising from the minutes of the previous meeting.</p>	
7 Update from Care In Action Representatives	Verbal update
<p>This is an opportunity for members of Care In Action (CIA) to feedback on recent activity.</p>	
8 Responding to Health Needs of Looked After Children	Presentation
<p>To receive a presentation from the Clinical Commissioning Group</p>	

(CCG) regarding responding to health needs of Looked After Children (LAC).

9 Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 2019/20 9 - 26

To provide the Committee with details of the contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) to quality assuring and improving services for Looked After Children (LAC). The report includes feedback from LAC gained through consultation with Care in Action, Brent's Children in Care Council, and provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO service in Brent as required by statutory guidance.

10 Fostering Service Quarterly Report, Quarter 3 (October 2020-December 2020) 27 - 40

To provide information to the Council's Corporate Parenting Committee about the general management of the in-house fostering service and how it is achieving good outcomes for children, in accordance with standard 25.7 of the Fostering National Minimum Standards (2011). The report details the activity of Brent's fostering service from 1 October to 21 December 2020.

11 Any other urgent business

Notice of items to be raised under this heading must be given in writing to the Head of Executive and Member Services or his representative before the meeting in accordance with Standing Order 60.

Date of the next meeting: Wednesday 28 April 2021



MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE **Wednesday 21 October 2020 at 5.00 pm**

PRESENT: Councillor M Patel (Chair), Councillor Conneely (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Gbajumo, Kansagra and Thakkar (all attendees were present in a remote capacity)

Also in attendance: Councillor McLennan (in remote attendance)

1. Exclusion of the Press and Public

RESOLVED: that under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the duration of the meeting, on the grounds that the attendance of representatives from the council's Children in Care council, necessitated the disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 2, Part 1 of Schedule 12A, as amended, of the Act, namely: Information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual.

2. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members

Apologies for absence were received from Carolyn Downs (Chief Executive, Brent Council).

3. Declarations of interests

None.

4. Deputations (if any)

None received.

5. Minutes of the previous meeting

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 15 July 2020 be approved as an accurate record.

6. Matters arising (if any)

None.

7. Update from Care In Action and Care Leavers In Action Representatives

S (Care Leavers in Action) informed the Committee that Onder Beter (Head of Looked After Children and Permanency, Brent Council) had encouraged care leavers to take walks during the lockdown which they had been doing. S had become a care experienced assessor and was part of a project helping young migrants settle into the UK. S was also in the final year of university completing a dissertation about care leavers' experiences during COVID-19. S had won £2000

from the Agency Project with a podcast for care leavers. Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) was working with S regarding using Brent as a space for the podcast. The London Children in Care Council had invited S to be a part of their advocacy board and S was an active member of Care Leavers in Action, which had recently completed a financial guide. S was part of the Care Leavers in Action events team who were looking to create some online events for Care Leavers Week. S had also been part of the Brent Youth Offending Service Panel and was a trustee for a mental health charity. S advised that Brent had been supportive through the Black Lives Matter movement and held discussions about how care leavers felt. S highlighted the online engagement with Gail Tolley for their Care Leavers in Action session.

M (Care Leavers in Action) updated the Committee that he had been applying for apprenticeships, and was looking at opportunities in the film industry. M had been camping with another care leaver who was in the care leaver Whatsapp group, which he advised had helped through the pandemic. They had learnt how to set up a tent and bush craft. M was also part of the events team for Care Leavers in Action helping to plan events for Care Leavers Week, and advised that the financial guide Care Leavers in Action had created was very concise and eye catching. They had also fed back on the Care Leavers Charter.

Michelle Hassett (Quality Assurance and Learning Service Manager, Brent Council) gave an update on behalf of a member of Care in Action. The young person was enjoying having the Care in Action sessions back in the Civic Centre. The young person had contributed to one of the sessions with an idea that the group could work on. The young person celebrated their 18th birthday and was happy that the group had remembered.

L (Care in Action) attended the Care In Action Group sessions and enjoyed having them in person again. L had returned to school and started GCSEs and was working on an individual creative project, and had joined a local football team.

The Committee thanked the representatives for their updates, noting how brave speaking in a virtual meeting was. They could see the benefits of being able to start sessions in person again and noted how well they had all supported each other during the difficult time.

RESOLVED: that the updates by the representatives of Care in Action/Care Leavers in Action be noted.

8. Update on Support Provided to Care Leavers During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Onder Beter (Head of Looked After Children and Permanency, Brent Council) presented the report which provided an update, following on from the previous report in July 2020, about the support provided to Children in Care and Care Leavers during the period from July 2020 to October 2020. Particularly the report was requested due to the risk of loneliness as a result of further restrictions in place in London.

In considering the report, the following points were raised:

M informed the Committee that during lockdown there had been an increase in the amount of money received from the Council which had helped with food and other expenses. The increase would last until the end of March 2021. Onder Beter advised in response to a query that Brent had increased the weekly subsistence allowance to match the increased universal credit rate introduced temporarily by Central Government. Councillor McLennan (Deputy Leader, Brent Council) advised that her expectation was that when the settlement and spending review was done in December there would be flexibility and she would speak with the Director of Finance.

There were 43 young people in Further Education, including university, who had all been supported as required. The service was aware how many students were staying in London, how many students were staying in university accommodation, how many students were thinking about returning home, and all necessary support was being provided to ensure the young people felt safe wherever they were.

RESOLVED: to note the content of the report.

9. **Closure Report on Leaving Care Improvement Plan Post-Ofsted Focused Visit in November 2019**

This report provided a summary of the actions completed following the recommendations arising out of the Ofsted focused visit on arrangements for care leavers that took place between 13 and 14 November 2019.

RESOLVED: to note the content of the report and actions undertaken by the Children and Young People's Department.

10. **The Brent Pledge for Looked After Children and Brent Care Leavers' Charter - 2020 update**

This report provided information to the Council's Corporate Parenting Committee on the revised Pledge for Looked After Children and the revised Care Leaver's Charter. The pledge and charter detailed the services and support that children in care and care leavers could expect from Brent Council as their corporate parent. Both the pledge and charter were informed and developed with Care in Action and Care Leavers in Action.

S (Care Leavers in Action) summarised the refresh of the Care Leaver's Charter. The Committee heard that 12 care leavers provided feedback in face to face sessions and also through the Whatsapp group chat. Care Leavers in Action requested specific reference to support for careers and employment goals and specific reference to physical and mental health. The group also suggested design assets and colours for the document.

L (Care in Action) advised that the Care in Action group had provided feedback for the Brent Pledge for Looked After Children. The group had asked for carers to be the very first promise as they felt it was important for children to connect with their

carers. The group had also suggested less complicated wording to increase understanding and for real pictures instead of silhouettes on the posters.

Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) advised that the Committee were being asked to sign off the content of the documents. The Partnership Group had commented on them, CMT had agreed them and now they were coming to the Committee for endorsement. The documents would then go to the Council's design team for colour and illustration as per the feedback from CLIA and CIA, before being sent to the Chair of the Corporate Parenting Committee for sign off and produced with her signature.

The Committee were happy that the documents had been co-created with Care in Action and Care Leavers in Action and that both groups' feedback had been incorporated into the revised documents. As a result, the Committee RESOLVED:

- i) To endorse the revised Brent Pledge for Looked After Children and the revised Care Leavers' Charter.

11. Fostering Service Quarterly Report, Quarter 1 (July 2020-September 2020)

The purpose of this report was to provide information to the Council's Corporate Parenting Committee about the general management of the in-house fostering service and how it was achieving good outcomes for children for the period from July 2020 to September 2020.

Onder Beter (Head of Looked After Children and Permanency, Brent Council) drew the Committee's attention to section 4.3 of the report, in which Brent Council had seen a drop in the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC). This was partly due to a number of UASC becoming care leavers post 18th birthday in Brent. As a result this had added to the number of care leavers previously UASCs in Brent, making up 31% of the total leaving care population. At the time of the meeting the Council only had comparable data from neighbouring Boroughs and it was confirmed that Brent had more over 18 UASCs than neighbouring Boroughs. In general, Brent supported 100 more care leavers the current year in comparison to the previous year as young people were now in receipt of support until the age of 25 as per legislative changes. Onder Beter advised the Committee that this would result in additional financial pressure.

The Committee heard that the business case for the Joint Fostering Project had been made to the DfE and officers were awaiting the outcome of the decision. There was an agreement in place between the other 2 Boroughs involved in the project, Hounslow and Ealing, which was subject to further agreement once more tangible aspects of the project were developed.

Regarding how foster carers had coped with the COVID-19 specific demands placed on them, such as managing contact, Onder Beter advised that they did face that challenge which was being faced across London as to how foster carers could support contact for families. West London Family Court had complimented Brent for their support around contact, noting that Brent had been more accommodating with contact. He added that he believed Brent were providing foster carers the right

amount of support with fortnightly Zoom support groups of around 20-30 foster carers.

In response to a query as to whether Brent had been encouraged to accept more children from other areas of the country, Nigel Chapman (Operational Director Integration and Improved Outcomes, Brent Council) clarified that they had been contacted by the Home Office asking whether they would consider taking on additional young people from Kent and Portsmouth. He advised that they had reluctantly declined for the moment but there was a wider conversation ongoing about the national transfer scheme with a strong message from London that other local authority areas should take a reasonable share of young people. In addition Brent had been unable to take additional young people as the Home Office had placed a large number of adults seeking asylum in a hotel in Brent and at least 12 had subsequently approached the Council stating they were under 18 and wanted to be considered as children which the Council were reviewing.

In response to a query about marketing activity in section 5.2 of the report, Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) advised that the fostering service was advertised in the Brent Council Magazine and this would be clarified in the next report.

RESOLVED: to note the content of the report.

12. **Six-Monthly Adoption Report - Adopt London West (April-September 2020)**

The report provided a briefing to the Council's Corporate Parenting Committee in relation to adoption performance data for the six month period from Adopt London West (ALW) and was presented by Debbie Gabriel.

The following key points were raised in relation to the report:

- ALW had approved 12 adopters in the reporting period with a total of 22 adopters since the service went live on 1 October 2019. 40% of those were from BAME communities and 36% were from LGBTQ+ communities.
- ALW were supporting 31 Brent families, with feedback from the families in section 9.1 of the report.
- In relation to Brent children, 2 children had been placed and 6 children had Adoption Orders.
- There was a growing range of support on offer to families. The WAF talks programme and webinar programme had received good feedback. There were ongoing support groups for adopters and special guardians, with educational psychology support. The online delivery of Foundations for Attachment, a 6-week virtual training programme, was due to begin.
- There was a range of support ALW was able to offer through COVID-19 funding, with adopters in one Borough receiving Non-Violent Resistance (NVR) 'Child to Parent' Violence training which had been well delivered through online training and made easy to attend.
- Specific services ALW purchased for special guardians were growing in momentum, such as Grandparents Plus. It was noted that it took time to build special guardians' confidence when many of them had not been through any preparation or training.

- The national recruitment campaign had begun in September 2020 with a lot of online activity, and the service was ready to respond to those additional enquiries they hoped to receive. There was a specific drive to support more BAME adopters which the service was supporting through the 'Meet the Adopter' events ran by the multi-faith based organisation "Home for Good".
- A recent meeting with Body and Soul, an arts based organisation in North West London, had resulted in the commissioning of programmes from them to do direct work with young people.
- An all staff training event delivered by Professor Beth Neil from University of East Anglia had helped to formulate provisional plans for the new birth family counselling service due from next April 2021. There was a "meet the market" event the following day to meet organisations interested in tendering for the service.
- The website continued to be developed with more user friendly content and was more visibly attractive. There was now content where interested families were guided through some self-help processes before they went to Adopt London West.

Debbie Gabriel informed the Committee that an increase nationally and in London had been seen in the number of enquiries for adoption, but noted that people interested in adoption were likely to spend a few years exploring before they were ready to make the progression to a formal assessment and there were no specific statistics to evidence this.

The Committee highlighted that Adopt London West received less allocation from the total government funding than some other Adopt London regions and queried why they received less, asking for reassurance that Adopt London West had maximised as much of the money as was possible. Debbie Gabriel advised that the settlement was based on the government funding formula for Councils. The funding allocated for Adopt London East and West was very similar but Adopt London North and South were bigger therefore allocated more. ALW had made the decision early on to pool as much money as possible to have a wider reach. Aside from annual subscriptions, which they encouraged adopters to make use of through social workers and weekly newsletters, funding was very time limited. Debbie Gabriel informed the Committee that some therapeutic support had continued until the end of the month and funding for the Grandparents Plus subscriptions services would last for a year. They had also made a commitment to give a grant allocation to the WAF Webinar Programme prior to receiving COVID-19 funding so they would continue to support that through the grant allocation. Nigel Chapman (Operational Director Integration and Improved Outcomes, Brent Council) added that they would include information on the adoption support fund and emergency funding at the next meeting and more information on the impact of adoption support, drawing out how Adopt London West had made a difference to children's and adopters lives.

Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) offered further reassurance to the Committee that all 4 Directors of Children and Young People's Services from the 4 partnered Boroughs sat on the Adopt London West Board that provided robust challenge on the deployment of funds.

The Committee asked for further details in relation to section 11.2 of the report, regarding turnaround times for applications to the Adoption Support Fund for specialist therapeutic services. Debbie Gabriel informed the Committee that normally the administration process of the fund was much slower than they would like, with an average wait of 3 months for therapy to start from the time an application was submitted. Adopt London West were confident that the applications by the social workers were submitted promptly, and there was no waiting list for a social worker to conduct an assessment, but it was after the application was submitted and the process of ensuring funding was agreed that caused the lengthy wait. However, as a result of receiving COVID-19 funding Adopt London West were able to commission the services and families could self-refer and see a therapist within a week, so it was much more responsive and Adopt London West would like to see that remain in the future. The Government were not due to make any formal announcements but there was a likelihood it would continue, therefore devolving an element of the budget would be hugely beneficial. Adopt London West were lobbying for this.

Regarding the monthly panel activity, the Committee highlighted that there was less matching in Brent. Debbie Gabriel advised that activity would appear small as there was a small number of children across Adopt London West and a small number of agreed adoption plans. There were a few children in Brent in the process of being linked with families so the next update would be able to confirm that they were matched. Onder Beter (Head of Looked After Children and Permanency, Brent Council) added that there were around 5 children currently in the process of family finding and 6 adoptions had been achieved in the reporting period, in comparison to 3 for the entire year the previous year.

RESOLVED: to note the contents of the report.


13. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 6:32pm

COUNCILLOR MILI PATEL
Chair

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 Brent	Corporate Parenting Committee 3 rd February 2021
	Report from the Strategic Director of Children and Young People
Brent Council Children and Young People Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report (2019/20)	

Wards Affected:	All
Key or Non-Key Decision:	N/A
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: (If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)	Open
No. of Appendices:	N/A
Background Papers:	N/A
Contact Officer(s): (Name, Title, Contact Details)	Sonya Kalyniak, Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance, Children and Young People. Sonya.kalyniak@brent.gov.uk Brian Grady Operational Director, Safeguarding, Partnerships and Strategy. Brian.grady@brent.gov.uk

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 This report provides the Committee with details of the contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) to quality assuring and improving services for Looked After Children (LAC). This report includes feedback from LAC gained through consultation with Care In Action, Brent's Children in Care Council. This report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO service in Brent as required by statutory guidance.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 The Corporate Parenting Committee is requested to review, comment on and question the contents of this report to ensure that IRO activity is providing effective support and challenge for services to LAC.

3. Details

Summary of Key Messages

What has gone well?

- IROs have worked closely with social workers, Child Protection Advisors, Children's Guardians, advocates and the LAC nurse to ensure that children's voices are heard and are central to decision-making.
- Brent LAC Review records are child-focused, written as a letter to the child. This has been shared with at least three local authorities as an example of good child-centred practice.
- The majority of children and young people benefit from having the same IRO throughout their care journey and children and young people feedback positively about this.
- 97% of reviews are held well within timescales and managed in the way that best responds to the child's needs.
- IROs fulfil their challenge function, including escalation when appropriate, ensuring impact for children and evidencing good practice.
- IROs have supported the outcome of increased permanency for children, in particular focusing on formal Placement Planning Meetings for children whose plan is long-term fostering.
- IROs' knowledge and expertise ensures that IROs offer appropriate oversight and challenge to inform effective care planning and promote best practice.

Compliment from an IRO to a social worker:

'Thank you again for preparing A and his sister prior to the review and your ongoing support to the foster carers. The parents have maintained a good working relationship with professionals and are supporting the care plan. This has been a challenging process and you have carried this family through. This is in no small part due to your commitment and hard work!'

- Independent Reviewing Officer 4/3/20

What can be improved?

- There continue to be some instances when Pathway Plans and LAC Review documents are not completed in a timely manner and available before the review.
- There was a reduction in the total number of children referred for advocacy support in 2019/20. IROs need to raise the profile of advocacy support.
- IROs need to be more robust in scrutinising the transition plan for children with SEND, including proactive review of the Education Health and Care Plan and incorporating this into the Care Plan and Pathway Plan.

Compliment from an IRO to a social worker:

'Thank you for the detailed care plan, report, support plan and final statement which you made available to me prior to the review. I thought the reports were well written and informative, clearly setting out the transition moving forward.'

- Independent Reviewing Officer 04/03/20

4. Review of 2019/20 IRO service priorities

The IRO service had four priorities to improve services and make an impact on positive outcomes for Looked After Children in 2019/20.

Priority 1: Complete the appointment of a permanent Service Manager

The recruitment of a permanent Service Manager is being undertaken as part of the overall restructure of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service. A permanent Service Manager is expected to be appointed in summer 2020. In the meantime, there has been consistency in interim arrangements throughout the year, with one interim manager overseeing the Service.

Priority 2: Monitor timeliness of LAC reviews to reach a target of at least 95% of reviews being completed within timescale.

The timeliness of LAC reviews has been monitored and managed effectively for 2019/20. The percentage of LAC reviews completed within time in 2019/20 was 95.3%.

Priority 3: Increase the number of LAC chairing or co-chairing their review from 7 to 14 in 2019/20.

IROs have discussed this offer consistently with LAC throughout the year and LAC have been given the option to chair their own review. Children and young people when asked have said that they would rather contribute and participate rather than chair their own review. This has been important learning from children and young people on how they wish to participate in their own review. Moving forward, chairing their review will remain one option for young people to choose how they participate in the review.

Priority 4: Evidence that continuous learning from feedback from children and young people, parents, professionals and carers through LAC reviews is fully embedded into the Learning and Development offer.

Quality assurance work, including audit activity and the LAC Tracking Panel, routinely reviews feedback from children about their care experience, including information gathered in their review. Themes and trends around this activity are regularly shared with IROs to drive practice improvement. This feedback is also used to develop practice improvement initiatives through our Learning and Development Offer. This includes Principal Social Worker led reflective sessions, the L&D newsletter and direct work tools.

5. Purpose of the IRO service

- 5.1 The Children Act 1989 and the Adoption and Children's Act 2002 make it a legal requirement for the Local Authority to appoint an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) to each child in care. The IRO Handbook provides the statutory guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) and their employers on their functions in relation to the case management and reviews for Looked After Children. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for Looked After Children and challenging drift and delay.
- 5.2 The IRO's primary focus is to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child in care and to ensure that their current wishes and feelings are given full consideration. It is not the responsibility of the IRO to manage the case, nor supervise the social worker or devise the care plan. Although it is important for the IRO to develop a consistent relationship with the child, this should not undermine or replace the relationship between the social worker and the child.
- 5.3 The IRO has the authority, independent of their employing Local Authority, to refer cases to the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS) should they believe the Local Authority's plan for the child is not in their best interests. The Statutory guidance states that the IRO manager should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the Corporate Parenting Committee.

Compliment from an IRO to a social worker:

'This case has moved forward in such a positive way since you have come on board. You have been consistent in following up review recommendations. You have always kept me up to date with developments and overall just shown a clear commitment and positive work ethic.'

6. Professional profile of the IROs

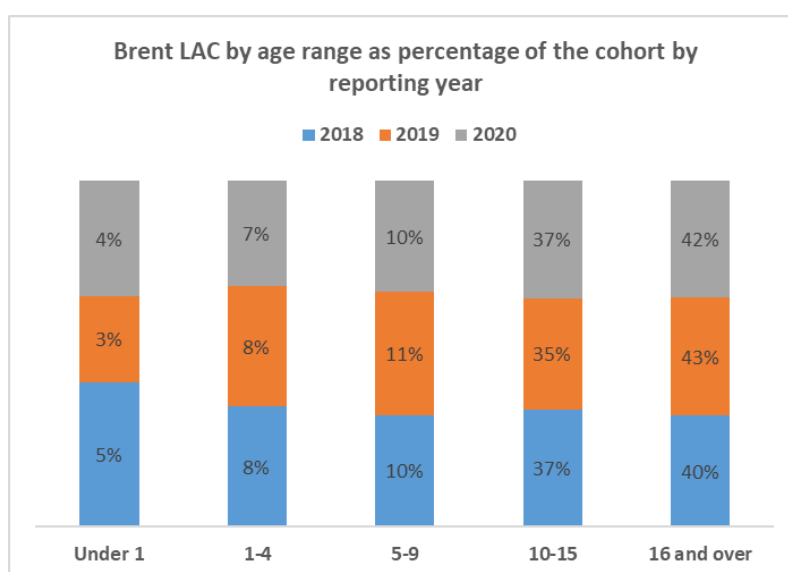
- 6.1 The IRO service sits within the CYP Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service. From September 2018, the IRO service was brought together with Child Protection Advisors who chair Child Protection conferences and the LADO (Local Authority Designated Officer) to form the Review and Safeguarding Team.
- 6.2 The Review and Safeguarding Team is managed by an experienced social worker. Brent directly employs two full time IROs and five Child Protection Advisors. The remainder of the IROs are experienced social work practitioners contracted through an independent agency, Aidhour (a not-for-profit company established in 1998). All IROs are Disclosure and Barring Service checked, Health Care Professional Council registered and fully qualified. Many of the IROs have been undertaking reviews for Brent for a number of years and know the children well. In some instances, the IROs have been the most consistent and trusted person in the child's life.
- 6.3 Following a review of the current arrangement, an extension was granted for Aidhour to continue providing IROs until October 2020 to allow a commissioning process to take place using the same model of in house and commissioned IROs. The current model of having in-house and commissioned IROs gives flexibility to respond to service demands while maintaining continuity and consistency for children and young people. For example, one of the Permanent IROs was on maternity leave from June 2019 until the end of the reporting period and during this time, cases were allocated to Aidhour.
- 6.4 There are 14 IROs in Brent including those permanent and from Aidhour. The number has increased by three from last year as two are focussed on chairing Fostering Reviews. There is an equal representation of male and female IROs (7 males and 7 females). This overall high level of retention of IROs has led to continuity of IRO input, stability for many of our Looked After Children and supported consistency in scrutiny and challenge.
- 6.5 The ethnicity of the IROs is less diverse than that of the Looked After Children population.

IRO Ethnicity	Number
White	10
Mixed	1
Asian or Asian British	1
Black or Black British	2

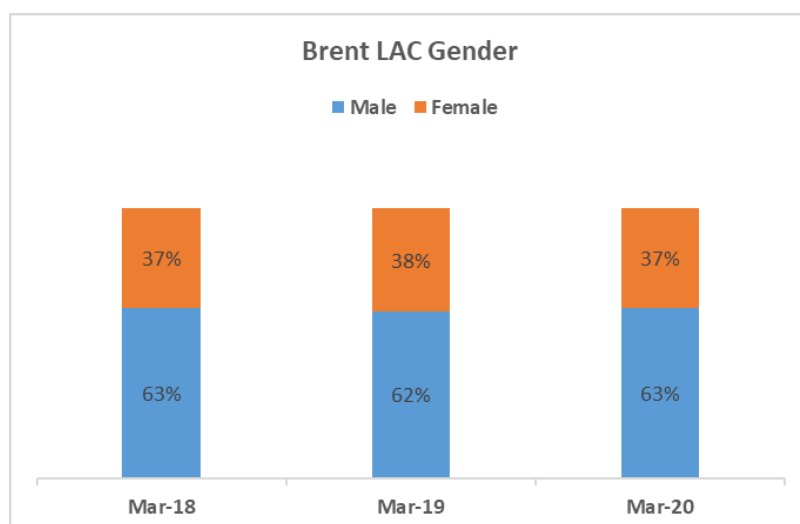
- 6.6 While it is noted that the ethnic composition of the IROs is not fully representative of the borough's Looked After Children population, services are provided within an equalities framework and all IROs, as qualified social workers, are expected to adhere to the Health and Care Professional Council code of conduct and Brent's internal policies and procedures. In addition to chairing LAC reviews, the two internal IROs also participate in undertaking audit and learning and development activity for staff and are part of the LAC tracking panel.

7. Profile of Brent's Looked After Children

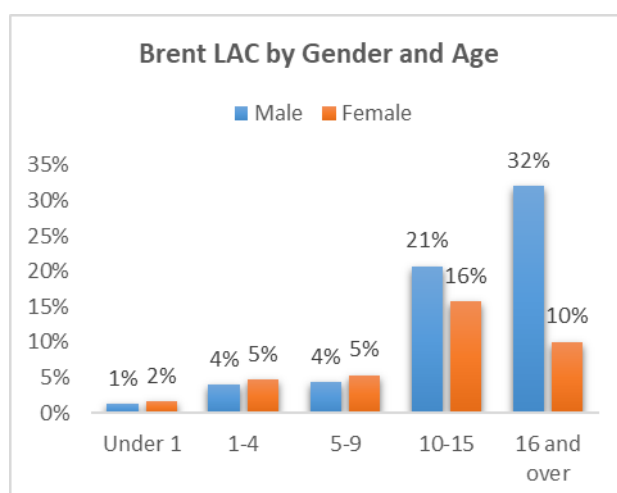
- 7.1 As of 31st March 2020, Brent had 299 Looked After Children, an increase of 1 in comparison to March 2019 when the LAC population was 298. This figure is lower than Brent's statistical neighbours and England in March 2018 and March 2019.
- 7.2 In March 2020, 65% of LAC were aged over 13 years old compared to 64% in March 2019 and 42% were aged 16-18, the same percentage as March 2019. This age profile is partially linked to external factors, such as the number of young people entering the UK as Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC).



- 7.3 As of 31st March 2020, 63% of Brent LAC were male and 37% female, a similar proportion to the previous two reporting years. Gender disproportionality is more marked with older children admitted into care, which may relate to the number of UASC who are predominantly male.



7.4 A breakdown of Brent Looked After Children gender and age in March 2020 is below:



7.5 The ethnic profile of Brent Looked After Children has changed over the past 3 years. The percentage of White children has decreased from 24% in March 2018 to 18.7% in March 2020. The percentage of Black or Black British children has also decreased from 33% in March 2019 to 29% in March 2020. The percentage of LAC with an ethnicity categorisation of “other ethnic groups” has increased. The total Brent children and young people population has increased to 77,893 according to the ONS 2018 mid-year population estimates. During the last national census in 2011, - 31.8% the proportion of the young people population in Brent was Asian or Asian British, 25.7% was Black or Black British, 25.2% White, 9% Mixed/ Multiple and 8.3% other Ethnic group.

Ethnicity	Brent			Statistical Neighbours		England	
	Mar-18	Mar-19	Mar-20	Mar-18	Mar-19	Mar-18	Mar-19
% White	24	22	18.7	38	36	75	74
% Mixed	19	18	18.4	17	18	9	10

% Asian or Asian British	19	<5	14.7	14	10	5	4
% Black or Black British	31	33	29.1	29	31	7	8
% Other ethnic groups	<5	15	19.1	5	5	3	4

8. Referrals and allocations

- 8.1 The interim Reviewing and Safeguarding Manager is responsible for ensuring children who come into care are allocated an IRO. Referrals to Aidhour are completed via the Aidhour Director who ensures children are promptly allocated to an Aidhour IRO, promoting effective communication and liaison with allocated social workers and the Review and Safeguarding Team. The team is supported by 0.5 post of a business support officer who processes invoices, liaises with Aidhour and allocated social workers and completes other administrative work as necessary.
- 8.2 Full time IROs carry a case load of 60 to 65 children at any given time. This case load is in line with national guidance and Ofsted recommendations. IROs are valued by social work staff as experts in the field of Looked After Children and as such offer guidance on care planning, as well as tracking individual plans through mid-way reviews.
- 8.3 Once allocated, IROs are expected to provide and maintain continuity and consistency in reviewing a child's care plan whilst they remain looked after. In addition, IROs complete midway reviews and liaise with the child's Guardian if there are court procedures as well as other professionals as and when required.
- 8.4 IROs carrying out review tasks have secure remote access to 'Mosaic', Brent's integrated children's services database, to input their reports and review the progress of a child's care plan. They are able to add a case note to a child's case record on Mosaic, record the midway review of care plans and identify any relevant issues that require escalation to senior managers for resolution. IROs also have secure remote access to the Brent internal e-mail system which facilitates confidential communication and information exchange, thus complying with data protection requirements.

9. Quality assurance and monitoring

- 9.1 The Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance and the interim Service Manager oversee the work of Aidhour IROs through group supervision, quarterly contract monitoring, audits, meetings and direct observations. Group supervision takes place once every two months and contract meetings take place once a quarter. Practice improvement discussions take place at this meeting through consideration of case studies. These meetings are also used as a forum of communication for IROs to raise any issues they may have with senior leaders. Those who have attended in the last year include the Strategic Director, Children and Young People, Head of Service for LAC and Permanency, the Head of the Virtual School, service managers in LAC Permanency and Permanency, including those responsible for Leaving Care, Fostering and Adoption and the service manager for Children with a Disability.

- 9.2 IROs, both in-house and Aidhour receive bi-monthly group supervision following the Signs of Safety approach. These sessions are used to give IROs time to reflect on practice, highlight areas of good practice, raise any issues with managers and receive feedback on audit themes and outcomes. This space allows for reflection on how cases have been successfully escalated in the best interest of children and discuss practice themes and trends. As part of the development for IROs, guest speakers from services are invited, including 2019/20 Brent Virtual School, Brent YOS, Brent CYP Commissioning and Resources Team, the London wide Rescue and Response Service, Barnardo's and CAFCASS.
- 9.3 The interim Service Manager and the two in-house IROs are also members of the LAC tracking panel, carrying out regular audits looking at the quality of review minutes, participation of Looked After Children in the decision making process, any drift in the care plan, and identifying any health or education issues. These audits have evidenced that IRO oversight and escalation are having a positive impact on outcomes for Looked After Children. The audits have also evidenced IRO supported involvement of children and young people's views in decision making processes. Where children do not attend their LAC review, IROs contact children and young people between reviews to ensure that children and young people remain involved in their plan and review. IROs also ensure that parents / guardians are involved where this is appropriate and in the best interest of the child.
- 9.4 Through the LAC tracking panel, audits were carried out focusing on Pathway Planning, Personal Educational Plans, permanency planning, appropriateness of placement and placement changes, education and health outcomes, visits and the quality of LAC review minutes. Audits have identified good practice around participation of children and child-focused LAC review minutes. Areas for development identified include the robustness of some pathway plans and transition plans for children with SEND, including incorporating a child's Education Health and Care Plan into the Pathway Plan and LAC Review minutes. Feedback from the LAC Tracking Panel is routinely shared with Aidhour and IROs through contract monitoring and group supervision and contract monitoring meetings. In line with our Quality Assurance Framework, this ensures that learning from audit activity is shared with IROs to drive practice improvement.

Case Study: S

S is a 1 year old child who was relinquished by her mother at birth. S' mother stated that she has no means to provide S with good care. S's mother is from Eastern Europe and as such although S was born in the UK, S takes on the nationality of her birth mother. Mother made it clear that her wish is for S to be adopted and did not wish to provide details of extended family. S was accommodated under section 20 and placed in foster care. The LA made a referral to CAFCASS, while continuing to support mother and explore the wider family network including the whereabouts of the father. Following this exploration, an adoptive placement was identified for S with a successful move to a forever family.

- 9.5 IROs continue to give positive feedback on the good working relationships with social work teams and work closely with Child Protection Advisors. This has assisted in both IROs and Child Protection Advisors responding to the needs of children and young people who become looked after following a period of being subject to a Child Protection Plan, in a timely manner. Child Protection Advisors are invited to the initial LAC review of any child who becomes LAC after a period of being subject to CP plan with a view of contributing to robust care planning across the professional networks.
- 9.6 IROs are positive about the quality of permanency planning in Brent including involvement of the wider family network at the earliest possible stage of permanency planning and the joint working observed between the locality and care planning services. IROs have been consulted on the review of Permanency Planning Meetings for Looked After Children over the age of 12.
- 9.7 The interim Service Manager attends London IRO Managers and West London Children's Guardians Meeting. These meetings look at local and national issues affecting Looked After Children as well as highlighting any learning that can be taken forward. Brent IROs have a good working relationship with Children's Guardians within West London Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS).
- 9.8 The annual meeting between the Strategic Director, Children and Young People and IROs took place on 22/01/20. IROs were updated on the outcome of the Brent ILACS focussed visit from Ofsted under the theme of Leaving Care and the action plan devised following this. IROs were also updated on the continued drive to increase the number of permanent staff and the Department's strategic priorities. The Strategic Director confirmed that no issues had been escalated to her in the past year and IROs were encouraged to escalate any unresolved issues if necessary.
- 9.8 Brent IROs have an established protocol with CAFCASS regarding good practice for Public Law work. This has helped to ensure cases in proceedings are subject to robust analysis and challenge about the matters of critical importance to the child's safety, wellbeing and permanency. Children's Guardians have provided positive feedback on both social work and IRO practice. At the last meeting held with CAFCASS Children's Guardians have stated that they have found Brent IROs responsive and independent.
- 9.9 Overall the quality of the minutes and how IROs chair and approach LAC reviews are assessed through audit to be good. Mid-way reviews and other activities such as escalations are visible on every file audited with some improvements required in the way minutes are distributed to children and partner agencies following a LAC review.
- 9.10 Following the first COVID-19 lockdown in late March 2020, IROs began to hold reviews virtually. Swift communication on virtual LAC Reviews and information/training for IROs on new the technology available led to compliments from IROs about an organised and thought through approach. Children have fed back that they like this way of working and there has been an increase in

participation at LAC Reviews. Overall, this new way of working has been adopted well by children and professionals.

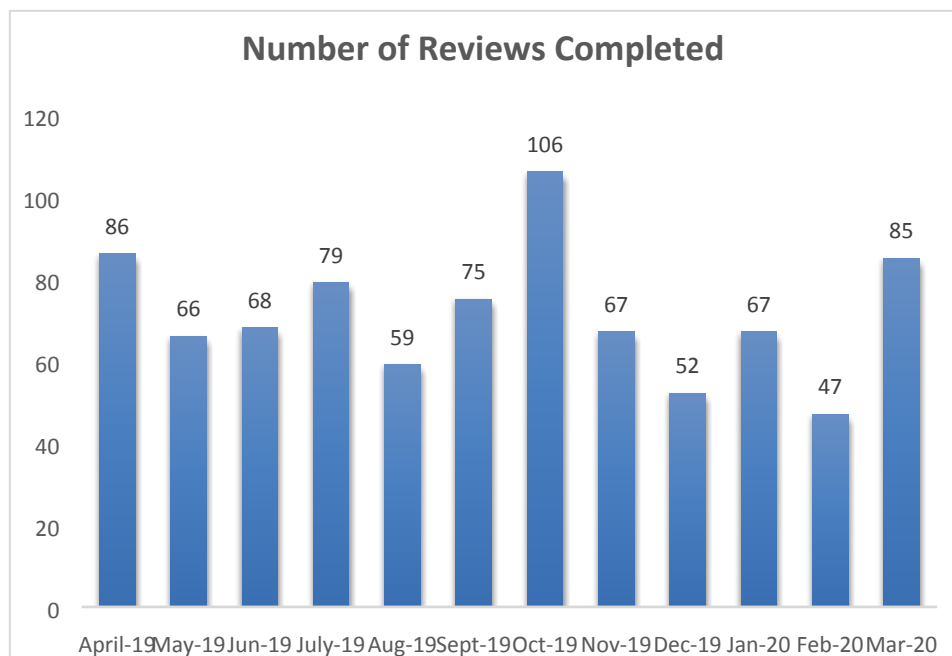
'I like that you saw my bedroom and my favourite toy through video link'

- Looked After Child, 11 years,
26/3/20

10. Performance of the IRO service

10.1 Performance summary:

- A total of 845 reviews were chaired by IROs in 2019/20, an increase of 69 reviews compared to 2018-19 (776 reviews).
- The vast majority of children and young people aged over 4 years (558 reviews) attended their review and spoke for themselves.
- On average there are 70 reviews chaired each month with peaks of 107 in Oct 2019, 86 in April 2019 and 81 in March 2020. Less busy months were December 2019 (51 reviews) and February 2020 (45 reviews). This variation is largely due to availability of children and young people, professionals, carers and family members in holiday periods.



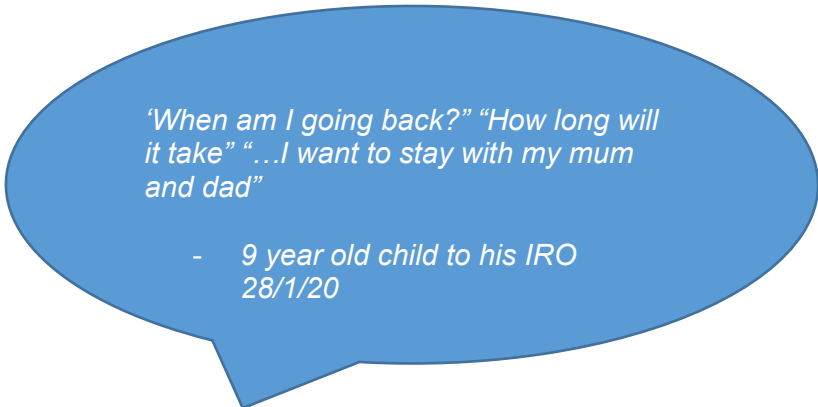
Overall, 97% of Reviews in 2019/20 were held within the statutory timescales.

10.2 Reviews are responsive and managed in the way that best responds to the child's needs. Examples include:

- IH is a LAC of 16 years and is an unaccompanied minor who came in to care when he was 13 years of age. The IRO, in discussion with IH and other professionals, identified that IH would like to remain in his placement long term and requested to stay there post 18 under staying put arrangements. The IRO escalated this to the service manager and following this, IH was formally matched with his carers through the formal PPM process and agreement for staying put given subject to a review nearer his 18th birthday.
- An IRO identified a delay in completion of an Education, Health and Care Plan for a 9 year old child placed in a long term foster placement. The IRO escalated this to Brent Virtual School and this was swiftly resolved.

11. Attendance and Participation of children

11.1 It is always preferable that children attend their review meetings and give their views. However, there are some children with additional needs and children who have suffered trauma which may impact on their behaviour who therefore may not be able to participate fully at their review meeting. IROs are sensitive to these children's needs and work with the allocated social worker and carer to listen to a child's views, wishes and feelings in a way more suited to them and incorporate this into their care plan. Children and young people are allowed to say how and who should attend their review. The service has actively sought out best practice examples to improve participation of children and young people.



'When am I going back?' 'How long will it take' '...I want to stay with my mum and dad'

- 9 year old child to his IRO
28/1/20

11.2 Reviews offer an important opportunity for children to have their say about their care plans and for professionals and carers to listen and take children's views into account. IROs encourage children to attend their reviews. If a child does not

want to attend their review he/she can participate in a number of other ways. Participation types are recorded in the chart below:

Type of participation	Number of Reviews in 2018-19	% of Reviews in 2018-19	Number of Reviews in 2019-20	% of Reviews in 2019-20
Child physically attends and conveys verbally	544	67.16%	559	65.23%
Child does not attend but is represented	28	3.46%	45	5.25%
Child aged under four	94	11.6%	100	11.67%
Child does not attend but conveys through medium such as an advocate	113	13.95%	128	14.94%
Child does not attend and is not represented	12	1.48%	17	1.98%
Child attends but does not convey and is not represented	8	0.99%	6	0.70%
Child attends and is represented	8	0.99%	2	0.23%
Child attends and conveys symbolically	3	0.37%	0	0.00%
Total	810	100%	857	100%

11.3 The majority of children and young people aged over four years (559 or 65.23% of reviews) attended their review and spoke for themselves.

Children's participation continues to be a strong focus of IROs and the social workers to ensure that the child's voice is heard and that reviews are held at a time and place to facilitate the greatest opportunity for attendance.

Case study: M

M is an 18-year-old who entered care at the age of 15 and was placed in foster care due to his mother's mental health concerns. M has one younger sibling and two half siblings. M regularly speaks to and visits his parents and siblings.

M focused on his education and to support this, he moved to a semi-independent accommodation near his college in another local authority. M achieved good results in his GCSE and A levels.

During his time in care, M's IRO advocated on his behalf to be given additional tuition sessions and the opportunity to view his semi-independent accommodation before moving. M was also able to go on holiday with his father and siblings during the summer. At his final review, M presented as a very confident person ready to move to independent living and study at university.

12. Advocacy

- 12.1 IROs routinely check that children and young people know about advocacy and how it can support them in having a say in decisions affecting their lives. As part of the initial LAC review children and young people are given information on Brent's advocacy and complaint service by their IRO. They also check at each review whether an Independent Visitor is needed and if there are any communication needs requiring additional or specialist support.
- 12.2 From April 2019 all advocacy for Looked After Children and Care Leavers is provided by Aidhour and commissioned on an individual basis as and when required. The total number of children referred for advocacy support in 2019/20 was 48. This is a reduction of 14 from 2018/19 and represents 16.5% of Looked After Children. In addition, 10 children had an Independent Visitor allocated. This is the same number as 2018/19.
- 12.3 The majority of advocacy requests related to children and young people's concerns in the following areas:
- Support required in the choice, type and location of placement
 - Young people not happy with their proposed care plan
 - Support required against a decision of age assessment for UASC
 - Contact with family members, particularly children wanting an increase in contact
- 12.4 Children placed in secure accommodation for their own safety under s25 of the Children Act 1989 are always provided with an advocate.

13. Quality of Care Planning

- 13.1 A primary function of IROs is to monitor the quality of care plans. IROs report that most children have a child friendly care plan, written in a clear and coherent manner. Children and young people are supported to contribute to their care plan and children and young people receive their own copy of their care plan.

14. Progress between reviews

- 14.1 IROs keep regular contact with social workers and monitor progress on permanency and care plans through a mid-way review conducted either by meeting with the social worker or via a telephone call or email with the social worker. The two in-house IROs take part in the LAC tracking panel and feedback to the wider group of the IROs at the IRO meeting of any emerging themes and patterns for all IROs to consider.
- 14.2 All Looked After Children are given a child friendly leaflet entitled 'My Independent Reviewing Officer' at their initial review. The leaflet has details of their IRO's name, contact number and email address. Children often contact their IROs directly to discuss issues worrying them.

'I would rather be with my parents but if not I am happy with my foster placement and want to stay here'

Page 22

- 9 year old 28/1/20

15. Oversight of care plans

- 15.1 IROs continue to monitor the quality of social work reports to ensure that reports meet the expected standard with attention paid to the child's progress in physical health, emotional wellbeing, school life and academic attainment, permanency and identity needs. Social workers' reports and updated care plans are not always available before the review. This does not allow the child, carers, parents and the IRO time to fully prepare for the review.
- 15.2 LAC have given feedback to indicate that they do not always receive the minutes following a LAC review. IROs also raised that social work reports are not always available at LAC reviews. Whilst IROs are satisfied overall with the level of communication and liaison that exists with social workers, there continue to be some instances when IROs are not consulted prior to a change of a care plan or placement.
- 15.3 IROs continue to drive social work practice by ensuring that young people have a Pathway Plan provided in a timely way and by escalating concerns if this is not in place. This includes promotion of Housing Vulnerability reports and encouraging an exploration of Staying Put arrangements.
- 15.4 When children subject of a Child Protection Plan become looked after, IROs work closely with Child Protection Advisors to bring forward the Child Protection Conference and avoid dual plans. This area of practice will continue to be developed and monitored.

16. Children's views about their IRO and their review process

- 16.1 Overall the experience reported by children of their IROs continues to be positive. The Interim Service Manager regularly receives feedback from the Looked After Children's Participation Officer and attends Care in Action, Brent's Children in Care Council. Children and young people state that they appreciate the consistent approach of IROs alongside their independence and availability. Children have also said that their IRO listens to their concerns and takes up issues with the relevant services where this is needed and that the issues are often resolved quickly.

In 2019/20 99% of Looked After Children over the age of four communicated their views, wishes and feelings at their reviews. This may have been through their attendance, through correspondence or completing a consultation form, by briefing an advocate, or through discussion with the IRO. IROs report that young people contact them between reviews by email or phone to share information or request support. IROs support children to chair or co-chair the meetings if they wish to do so.

Children and young people say that they do not always agree with their proposed care plan but are generally happy with the support given by their allocated social workers. IROs are consulted when there is a change of care plan or placement and also receive regular feedback following the LAC tracking panel held monthly and outcomes of children placement panel and entry to care panels. Children and young people said that they prefer and appreciate the face to face discussion they have with their IRO prior to their review than having to complete consultation forms. Children and young people have said that having to complete consultation forms is not interactive enough. Children and young people also appreciate access to advocacy which is always granted upon request by children and young people or other professionals such as allocated social workers, IROs and foster carers.

'I do not want to move to foster carer'

- Child
25/11/19

'It's been a pleasure having her with us. We treat her just like any of our children. The same rules and expectations apply. We are happy to see her do so well.'

- Brent Foster carer about young person regarding their staying put arrangement
19/11/19

'L is doing much better and she seems much happier. She is a joy to have around'.

- Foster carer 25/11/19

1. Escalations and conflict resolution

One of the key functions of the IRO is to identify and resolve problems arising from the care planning process. In Brent this function is undertaken through an agreed Looked After Children Escalation Management Process. The IRO in the first instance, seeks to resolve the issue informally with the social worker and the social worker's manager. If this is unsuccessful the IRO escalates this to the Team Manager and Service Manager. If the issue is not resolved, the IRO will escalate further to the Head of Service.

16.2 Issues identified in escalation are used to target support and challenge practice to make improvements. Young people have reported that they feel supported when IROs raise concerns and alerts about practice or plans.

16.3 A total of 32 escalations were initiated by IROs in 2019/20 compared to 49 escalations in 2018/19.

'I would like to return to live with my family and need an advocate.'

- young person age 14

16.4 Of the 32 case escalations raised by IROs, all but three were resolved at the social worker, Team Manager, Service Manager and Head of Service levels. Three reached the Operational Director level. The three cases dealt by the Operational Director concerned lack of clarity on a care plan for a baby, an unplanned placement move regarding a young person who had repeated missing episodes and a request for the Local Authority to consider secure accommodation. The overall issues raised in escalations include the following areas:

- Key work and emotional support to young people in semi-independent placements
- Delay in progressing care plan
- Delay in the completion of Personal Education Plans, Placement Planning Meetings and health assessments
- Safeguarding concerns such as child sexual exploitation and young people going missing
- Delay in the application for a passport for a Looked After Child.
- Contact with siblings and wider family members.

16.5 The use of the escalation processes proved successful in resolving issues in the vast majority of cases. In a small number of escalations, complexities of the case meant that the response to the issues raised by the IRO did not fully resolve the IRO's concern. In these cases differences of opinion were acknowledged and senior management oversight ensured there was clear Local Authority decision making in the best interests of the child.

16.6 One example of a successful escalation is when an IRO disagreed with the care plan of a 14-year-old who was in a kinship arrangement. There were a variety of concerns in the young person's immediate family including parental alcohol misuse, familial gang affiliation and potential criminal exploitation through county lines. The young person was proactive in making her wishes and needs known in the review process. The IRO listened to her views and raised concerns when the Local Authority did not complete a Kinship Assessment of her aunt and uncle who she was living with that meant that she may have needed to move to a foster care placement. The IRO advocated for the young person to remain with her aunt and uncle until such a time that she could go home. The IRO challenged the Local Authority around drift and encouraged social workers to progress the care

plan. The IRO encouraged the professional network to listen to the young person who communicated the strong need for her to remain in the care of her family network. This is a good example of using the review process to listen carefully to the young person about how she could remain both safe and in the care of her family.

17. Priorities for 2020/21


17.1 Priorities to improve the IRO service during 2020/21 are as follows:

1. IROs to provide additional scrutiny in the transition plan for children with SEND, including proactive review of the Education Health and Care Plan and incorporating this into the Care Plan and Pathway Plan.
2. IROs to promote Care in Action and Junior Care in Action and the Brent advocacy offer at every review.
3. IROs to monitor completion of reports and distribution of LAC Reviews and where, this is not happening in a timely manner, escalate to the appropriate Service Manager.

Contact Officer

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 Brent	Corporate Parenting Committee 3 rd February 2021
	Report from the Strategic Director of Children and Young People
Brent Fostering Service Quarterly Monitoring Report: Quarter 3: 1st October to 31st December 2020	

Wards Affected:	All
Key or Non-Key Decision:	N/A
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: (If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)	Open
No. of Appendices:	N/A
Background Papers:	N/A
Contact Officer(s): (Name, Title, Contact Details)	Onder Beter, Head of Service for Looked After Children and Permanency Nigel Chapman Operational Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1** The purpose of this report is to provide information to the Council's Corporate Parenting Committee about the general management of the in-house fostering service and how it is achieving good outcomes for children. This is in accordance with standard 25.7 of the Fostering National Minimum Standards (2011).
- 1.2** This report details the activity of Brent's fostering service from 1st October – 31st December 2020.

2.0 Recommendation(s)

- 2.1** The Corporate Parenting Committee is requested to review, comment on and question the contents of this report. This is to provide evidence that the management of the fostering service is being monitored and challenged in order to promote good outcomes for children.

3.0 Background

3.1 Service Priorities

The in-house fostering function is positioned within the LAC and Permanency Service (LACPS) of the Children and Young People's Department. Relevant parts of the LACPS service plan 2020/21 set out the vision for fostering as below:

- Continue to improve the stability of children by providing more local and in-house placement options, minimising change of social workers and placements.
- Developing partnerships with neighbouring authorities to recruit and retain more foster carers
- Continuing to run targeted marketing and recruitment strategies to recruit fostering households for teenagers
- Continue to provide an excellent learning and development package for foster carers who will have permanent supervising social workers to supervise and support them.
- Be creative and innovative in engaging and supporting placements for children during the Covid-19 Pandemic to minimise negative impact on children and young people.

3.2 Staffing Arrangements

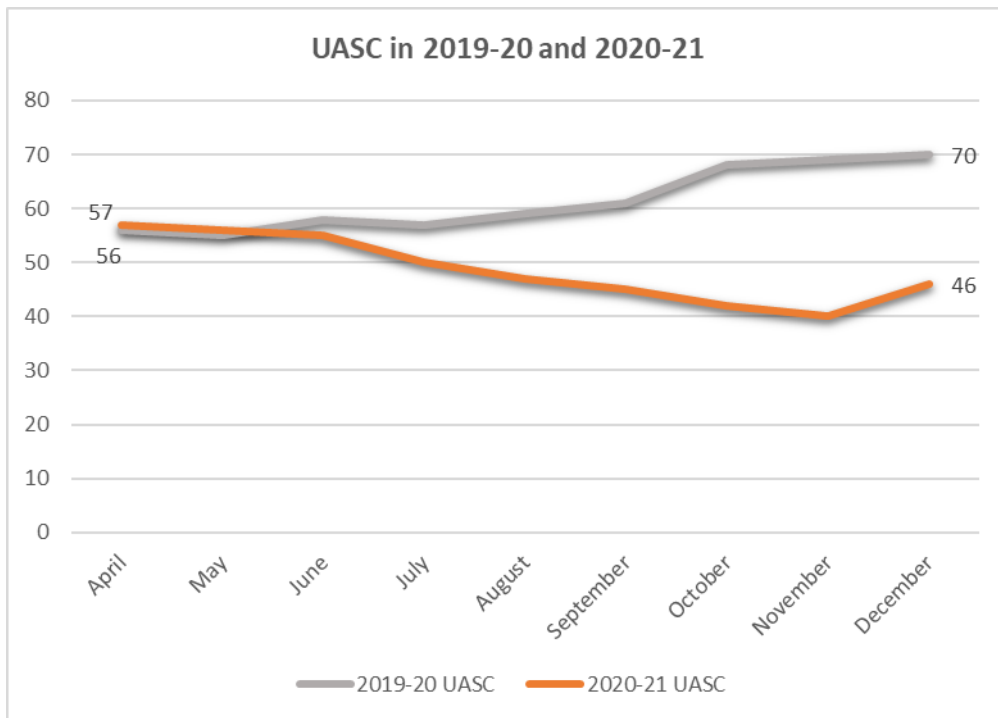
The Fostering Support and Assessment Teams consist of two team managers, 12 social work posts and one marketing and recruitment officer (MRO) post. The workload within the teams continues to grow as new kinship and foster carers are approved and need to be allocated for support when they care for children. All posts are filled with permanent members of staff.

4.0 Placement Activity

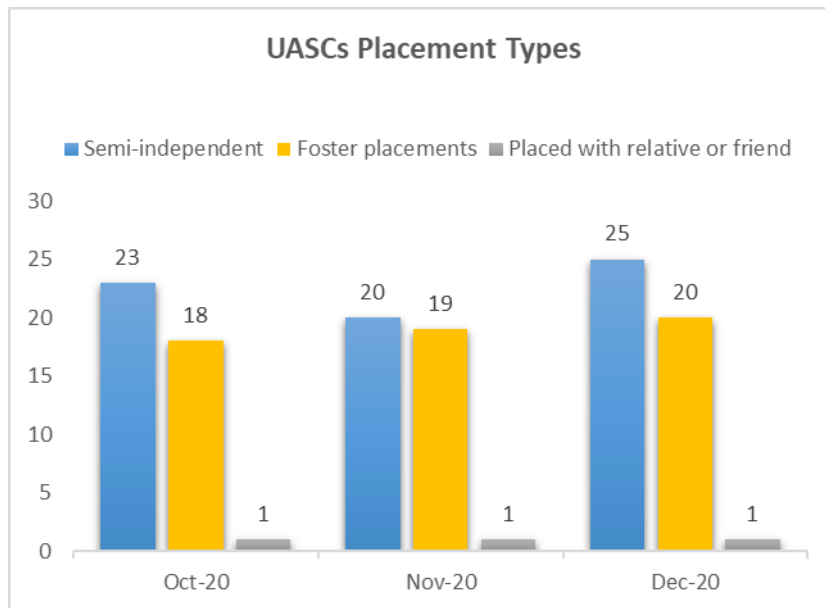
- 4.1** The number of looked after children has been relatively stable compared to the previous quarter. The total number of looked after children as at 31st December 2020 was 296, which is a decrease by 2 children from Q2 2020-2021 (298 children) and a decrease of 9 children from the same period in 2019 (305 children).
- 4.2** The corporate performance targets for 2020/2021 are as below:

- Percentage of looked after children placed with in-house (Brent) foster carers – annual target 30% - the actual percentage as of 31st December 2020 was 20.6% (61 children), a decrease by 2.9%% from the previous quarter Q2 of 2020-2021, 23.5% (70 children).
- Percentage of looked after children placed with a relative or family friend – annual target 15% - the actual percentage as of 31st December 2020 was 13.5% (40 children), a decrease by 0.6% from Q2 of 2020-2021 (14.1%, 42 children). Brent's commitment to place children within their family and friends' network has continued.
- Percentage of looked after children placed in independent fostering agencies – annual target 25% - the actual percentage as of 31st December 2020 was 27.7% (82 children); an increase by 1.2% from Q2 of 2020-2021 (26.5%, 79 children).
- Percentage of looked after children overall within foster placements – annual target 70% - the actual percentage as of 31st December 2020 was 61.8% (183 children), a decrease by 2.3% Q2 of 2020-2021(191 children, 64.1%). This was primarily related to older teenagers becoming looked after in this reporting period and the challenges in finding foster placements for this cohort of young people, related to a regional placement sufficiency issue.
- There were 57 looked after children in registered semi-independent accommodation (residential accommodation not subject to Children's Home Regulations) as at 31st December 2020, which represents 19.3% of all looked after children. This is an increase of 2.5% at the end of Q2, 2020-2021 (16.8%, 50 children). This is related to the age profile of children becoming looked after as explained in the above bullet point.

4.3 As of 31st December 2020, there were 46 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), 1 more than at the end of Q2 of 2020-2021. The Covid-19 pandemic has seen a nationwide reduction in the number of UASC presenting for assistance from local authorities. Additionally, Brent had 16 referrals from adult asylum seekers, placed in one of the local hotels in Brent by the Home Office, who claimed to be unaccompanied asylum seeking children. Social Work Teams have been involved in undertaking age assessments and associated legal procedures i.e. judicial review proceedings.



4.4 The majority of UASC are placed in semi-independent accommodation (25, 2 more than at the end of Q2, 2020-21 and 25 are in foster placements.



5.0 Recruitment and Assessment

5.1 Brent's Marketing and Recruitment Officer (MRO) has continued to focus on online fostering recruitment activity, which suits the present climate of a reduction in face-to-face work. There has been no drop in the number of attendees to the

fostering information evening. On the contrary, there has been a slight increase in the number of people expressing an interest to foster.

- 5.2** All marketing activity during this period has been carried out online through the Brent Council website, the Brent Council magazine, the fostering newsletter, and social media, and offline via a local radio station. Interested parties made enquiries by phone or online and the team carried out initial visits and assessments virtually, via video calls, ensuring that the experience by prospective carers was for 'business as usual'. The monthly fostering information evenings took place online via Zoom, which attendees reportedly enjoyed, and found more convenient than having to travel to a venue to hear more about fostering. The consistent positive feedback has led to plans for more virtual events moving forward, post-pandemic.
- 5.3** In addition to online recruitment activities, a media partnership with 'The Beat London Radio', a local radio station based in Harlesden, was signed. As a result, two representatives from the fostering team and a foster carer were invited to attend a live radio show in December 2020, focused on fostering. A foster carer for Brent of five years, was the speaker, and had an in-depth conversation about fostering with the presenter of the show. In addition to the live show, as part of this agreement, Brent benefits from eight 'live reads' during four radio shows held between 20th December 2020 and 31st January 2021. Live reads are advertorials on fostering, devised by Brent's MRO, that the show presenter reads throughout the show to capture the attention of the audience, to raise awareness about fostering and to encourage people to apply to become foster carers.
- 5.4** During this period a new type of recruitment event was trialled – an online fostering coffee morning. It took place on 1st October 2020 on Zoom in place of the usual evening information session. 14 people booked to attend the event and five people attended on the day. The number of participants was smaller compared to an evening fostering information evening, possibly because the event took place in the morning when people are busier. As such, this will be an additional event in future, to complement the information evenings rather than substitute for them.
- 5.5** Engagement has continued with all fostering supporters (those who have expressed an interest in fostering but are not yet ready to commit to being assessed) through the fostering newsletter. The number of subscribers to the newsletter has reached 2,600, compared to the previous reporting period when there were recorded 2,140 recipients. The focus has also been on creating informative blog articles to populate media channels (with the aim of Brent Fostering being at the top of Google searches for the word 'fostering') and to educate potential applicants on certain aspects of fostering in order to inspire and empower them to apply for fostering. The content was written in collaboration

with a freelance qualified social worker as part of a guest blogging arrangement. The topics included 'how to make an informed decision'; 'why and how to practice emotional intelligence, 'how to manage expectations to lead a more fulfilling life' and 'recognising strength, courage and resilience in yourself and in others'. These are not topics strictly related to fostering, however they are aimed at educating people about care and wellbeing, which are core topics in foster care and of particular relevance at challenging times, such as the present. The content produced has generated over 50% of the total traffic to the fostering pages in the reporting period.

- 5.6** Out of all the social media channels used, Facebook remains the top one. On Facebook, the MRO engages with members of the Brent community through organic posts and by sharing information about fostering in small community groups. The MRO has continued to develop the service's Instagram presence, which resulted in an increase in the number of followers; Brent's Fostering page is currently counting 113 followers, up from 84 in June 2020.
- 5.7** The marketing activity produced 35 information evening bookings (for the November and December sessions only; the October event was replaced by the coffee morning). These resulted in 25 enquiries and 4 initial visits taking place during the reporting period.
- 5.8** Of the 4 initial visits undertaken:
- 1 resulted in the applicant being recommended for stage 1 of the assessment process, but subsequently withdrew due to the ill health of a family member;
 - 3 ended in a negative outcome due to not being suitable – 1 for personal reasons and the other 2 lacking suitable accommodation.
- 5.9** 1 applicant was fast tracked from an Independent Fostering Agency to stage 2, as they had a Brent child already in placement and wished to transfer to Brent, believing that this would offer her more support.
- 5.10** Of the 7 assessments reported in the last reporting period as being in stage 1:
- 4 assessments have progressed to stage 2, 2 of which are due to be presented to the fostering panel in February 2021 and the other 2 in March 2021;
 - 2 assessments ceased in stage 1 – 1 due to a lack of English language ability and the other due to a lack of engagement with the assessment; and
 - 1 remains in stage 1.
- 5.11** Of the 2 assessments reported as being in stage 2 in the last quarter, 1 was recommended for approved at panel in November 2020 and the other remains in stage 2 but is on hold due to the family being affected by Covid-19.

5.12 In this reporting period there are 7 assessments underway:

- 1 assessment remains in stage 1 due to changes in their personal circumstances that require further exploration;
- 6 assessments are in stage 2.

6.0 Fostering Panel

6.1 Brent has a Fostering Panel constituted in accordance with Regulation 23 of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011. The service maintains a diverse and highly experienced central list of panel members that includes an elected member. The panel chair and vice chair are independent people with professional and personal experience of fostering and panel members include those with personal experience of the fostering system. Current demand requires three panels to be held every two months.

6.2 Fostering Panels have been conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams since 3rd April 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. With experience, panels now run more smoothly and do not take longer than face-to-face panels any more, as was previously reported.

6.3 The functions of the fostering panel are to consider:

- each application and to recommend whether or not a person is suitable to be a foster carer or Connected Person(s) (Family and Friends foster carer) and the terms of their approval;
- the first annual review of each approved carer and any other review as requested by the service, including those of a Standards of Care issue and those exploring any allegations made;
- the termination of approval or change of terms of approval of a foster carer; and
- the long-term fostering matches of all children below the age of 12.

6.4 During the period 1st October – 31st December 2020, 4 panels were held with 17 specific cases discussed during these sessions. Within these cases:

- 1 new fostering household was recommended for approval;
- 1 new 'family and friends' fostering household was recommended for approval;
- 7 fostering households were found suitable to continue as foster carers following review;
- 3 'family and friends' fostering households were found suitable to continue as foster carers following review;

- the approval of 1 fostering household was terminated due to standards of care concerns;
- 1 assessment was ended in stage 2;
- 3 fostering households resigned from their fostering role. 2 of these cited a natural end to their fostering career (after 13 and 28 years respectively). The third resigned following a Standards of Care investigation.

All of the recommendations made above were ratified by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) who is the Head of LAC and Permanency.

7.0 Training and Support for Foster Carers

7.1 The Learning and Development Programme

The Quality Assurance Learning Officer, who arranges training for foster carers, reports that only one face-to-face training session was offered to carers during this period due to adhering to safe Covid-19 working practices. This was “First Aid”, as it was felt it could be offered safely via social distancing but would be less effective as a virtual session.

7.1.1 Eight courses were offered virtually during the period under review using Zoom:

- Professional Boundaries
- Digital Safety
- Advanced Safeguarding
- Safer Caring
- Health and Safety for Social Workers
- Health and Safety for foster Carers
- First Aid
- Managing Challenging Behaviour
- Equality, and Diversity

7.1.2 The feedback in relation to these courses was extremely positive:

“All of the [Advanced Safeguarding and Safer Caring Training] course will help to improve and give me a better understanding about how to protect the children in my care. The training provided useful information also about legal barriers I was previously unaware of having lived in the Philippines until recently.”

“I think the [Digital Safety] trainings will help me to improve my skills and knowledge in internet based platforms.”

“The [Managing Challenging Behaviour] course has equipped me with the understanding of how managing behaviour relates to child development i.e. how old a child is when they empathise.”

7.1.3 All carers additionally have access to an online training package provided by an external provider, AC Education. The training courses offered range in topics from ‘Positive parenting skills’ to therapeutic courses such as ‘Play Therapy’ and can be accessed at any time of the day and at the weekend in response to carers asking for more flexible training times. Feedback from foster carers has been positive for all training commissioned and sign up has increased.

7.1.4 Supervising social workers continue to emphasise the importance of attending training to foster carers in their visits. The Quality Assurance Learning Officer regularly advertises the training brochure of courses on offer via email, in the fostering newsletter, and at foster carer support groups.

7.1.5 Uptake regarding the online training has been positive. As such, Brent have agreed to an additional 150 places providing access to online courses under a new agreement with AC Education from September 2020. Carers have access to the same courses, but can now complete up to four per person instead of two, as was the case previously.

7.1.6 During this time of uncertainty, Brent continues to meet the statutory duty to commission and facilitate learning events for foster carers. The learning and development team engage foster carers with innovative ways of offering learning and development. The online courses include mandatory, core and specialist training modules, specifically designed for foster carers. Moving forward, the team intend to expand the variety of training courses through zoom. They have increased additional support to carers by offering basic IT workshops once a month for those struggling to understand IT processes.

7.1.7 During the current lockdown period foster carers are being consistently reminded and encouraged to ensure the children in their care physically attend school. They are receiving support from their supervising social worker and the Virtual School for LAC to achieve this.

7.2 Support from supervising social workers

7.2.1 Alongside recruitment, retention of foster carers is a priority for the team, and the support offered to foster carers forms a large part of why carers remain committed to Brent according to a survey conducted by St. Christopher’s Fellowship, as noted in point **9.1** below. The Covid-19 Pandemic has affected the lives of all Brent’s foster carers. The cohort of carers is diverse but many are

in a high-risk category by nature of their ethnicity, age or health conditions. Despite this, they have continued to support the children and young people in their care by agreeing to take additional placements, sometimes at very short notice, despite multiple bereavements and the increased risk of introducing more people to their households. The support offered to the carers has therefore never been more crucial or appreciated. The compliments continue towards the Supervising social workers, Team manager and MRO in keeping spirits high and reassurance concerning Covid-19.

“During this very difficult time, I am really grateful for the work undertaken by members of the fostering team and their managers. It has been invaluable and reassuring.”

S, currently fostering five children.

“Without the support and knowhow of the MRO, we would not be able to manage the technical side of fostering in Brent, for example training and group sessions, using different platforms... It helps us stay connected and strong as we cannot see each other in person.”

A group of foster carers at December's support group

7.2.2 The impact of fostering on the birth children of foster carers has long been appreciated by Brent's fostering teams. The Fostering Network launched a national initiative called 'Sons and Daughters of Foster Carers Month' which took place in October 2020. The MRO carried out a variety of activities as part of this initiative: certificates of appreciation and digital gift vouchers were sent to the children of Brent foster carers. The recipients said that they appreciated the fact that their contribution to fostering was valued and acknowledged. The parents of the children were impressed by this initiative as well, and the feedback was positive from both the foster carers and their sons and daughters. We are looking forward to creative ways to support this initiative next year.

7.2.3 Apart from regular online calls, emails and mobile text messaging have been two main communication channels to keep foster carers engaged and informed. A monthly newsletter, which includes generic updates in relation to council and fostering matters, is sent out at the beginning of each month, and several other one-off emails go out every time the service has new important updates to share with the cohort of foster carers. Recent examples of this include the communications about Brent schools remaining open for vulnerable children, and support with home schooling from the Virtual School. All email messages are followed up by a text message alerts to ensure foster carers are notified whenever a new email reaches their inbox. Using text messages, the service has managed to increase the open rate of all emails.

- 7.2.4** Brent fostering is also constantly rewarding its foster carers whenever they are a guest speaker at information evenings, present at the Skills to Foster training before fostering applicants, or take part in other recruitment activities. Foster carers have been very appreciative of this and as a result they have engaged more and have become more proactive in supporting the service needs. Those carers who have felt able to volunteer have shared their experience at support groups, thus encouraging others to do the same.
- 7.2.5** During the reporting period, the MRO carried out an exercise with a focus group, including: foster children and their foster carers; Care in Action; and Junior Care in Action members, to get feedback on the proposed new fostering guides for children and young people. As part of this exercise, the MRO received helpful constructive feedback and the fostering guides were amended according to their input.
- 7.2.6** In December 2020, all foster carers switched from using the Brent carer emails to SharePoint, which is a secure information-sharing platform. Foster carers have been offered three training sessions during October and November 2020 to prepare them for using the platform starting 1st December. The feedback from the foster carers has been varied, with some users enjoying the platform while others need more time to adjust to it. The service will monitor how SharePoint is received and make changes and improvements accordingly. The MRO is always on hand to offer support where needed.
- 7.2.7** The monthly foster carers' support group continues to be facilitated virtually in response to the need to socially distance. Foster carers' feedback that they find these online sessions useful and this view is supported by the increasing number of attendees each month; a shared view is that it is easier to commit to such a group without having to leave home to attend. To enable more carers to attend, the groups alternate between daytime (10am – 12pm) and evening (5:15 – 7:15pm) slots. The support groups that took place during the reporting period focused on a wealth of topics ranging from 'current digital transformations within the department', to 'the annual foster carers' celebration'. Foster carers lead the sessions and put forward ideas for content and then the fostering teams arrange for guest speakers to attend. The carers proactively use the sessions to inform and update themselves as well as network and meet carers previously unknown to them.
- 7.2.8** The topic of the virtual support meeting held in October focused on finalising plans for the end of year celebration. The foster carers welcomed the idea of having their achievements celebrated, however they also expressed their concern about attending the event in person due to Covid-19. Changes in government guidance in relation to the Tier system also prevented a face-to-face event. A virtual get-together was considered, but carers consistently felt

that with coping with the additional emotional requirements of Covid-safe practice, a simple thank you message from senior managers and a small financial 'thank you' would suffice. As such, each fostering household received a £50 digital gift voucher and a certificate was prepared to go alongside this. In order to send a message of appreciation, videos are being recorded by the Lead Member, the Strategic Director of Children and Young People, and the Operational Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes, to be shared in January 2021, thus starting the New Year on a positive note.

7.2.9 At the support group in November 2020, participants were given a platform where they could find support in the time of Covid-19. Attendees at the event were happy to see one another and share advice and information regarding aspects such as Shared Platform, training, Staying Put, filing Income Tax, and looking after the children's and their own health and wellbeing. Like many other sessions, this one as very well attended and participants felt that a wealth of important information was shared.

7.2.10 The support group in December 2020 was another meeting the participants found invaluable. Several topics were discussed and issues were raised with the facilitating social workers to take to management. The main topics of discussion included the fact that some foster carers do not have a smart personal device, which is a hindrance when it comes to viewing email, opening documents or attending video meetings. This led on to a discussion about children, how they use the internet, and promoting digital safety. Finally, a lengthy conversation was had about financial matters, including: opening bank accounts for children and young people in care, and whether a council tax discount was being considered for foster carers as is in existence in other local authorities. At the same event, the service also launched a call for volunteers to support recruitment and to talk at the Skills to Foster training sessions in 2021.

8.0 Monitoring – reviews, allegations, complaints

8.1 A total of 19 foster carer annual review meetings were conducted during the period. All reviews were held within timescales.

8.2 During this quarter, there were no complaints made by or against any Brent foster carers.

9.0 New Developments

9.1 Update on Joint Fostering Feasibility Project

The Department for Education (DfE) did not allocate further funding for this project to move to the next stage. As such, the focus remains on developing

closer working arrangements with interested neighbouring local authorities to improve placement stability and choice to reduce the likelihood of 11 – 15 year olds with challenging behaviour from being placed in residential care. To this end, the Heads of Service in Brent and Ealing have remained in communication. Hounslow has confirmed they will not continue with further collaborative discussions. However, senior Leaders in Harrow have expressed an interest in joining the project. Further updates will be provided to the Committee as this progresses.

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