



Corporate Parenting Committee
16 February 2016

**Report from the Strategic
Director of Children and Young People**

Brent Fostering Service Quarterly Monitoring Report
1st October – 31st December 2015

1.0 Summary

- 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 The report covers the third quarter of this reporting year.

2.0 Recommendations

- 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 Service Values

- 3.1 The in-house fostering function is positioned within the Placements Service of Children and Young People's Services. The vision for the Placements service as set out in the 2015-16 service plan is that:
- The best foster carers are recruited for our children.
 - All placements receive high quality support, effectively targeted according to need and providing good value for the Local Authority.
 - The number of children placed closer to home with our in-house foster carers' increases.

- Children are found permanent families without delay – whether within their extended family network or outside.
- Staff within the service are encouraged to become more professionally autonomous and confident.

4.0 Staffing Arrangements

- 4.1 The primary in-house fostering functions are distributed across two teams:
- The recruitment and assessment of foster carers is completed within the Placements Assessment and Recruitment Team.
 - The ongoing support and supervision of foster carers is the responsibility of the Fostering Support Team.
- 4.2 The Fostering Panel Advisor, Fostering Reviewing Officer and Fostering Development Co-ordinator roles are also managed within the Placements' Service and are line managed separately from the two operational teams in order to provide appropriate challenge within the service.

5.0 Placement Activity

- 5.1 The corporate performance targets for this year relating to fostering are as follows:
- Percentage of LAC placed with in-house (Brent) foster carers – annual target 35%.
 - Percentage of LAC placed with a relative or family friend – annual target 15%
 - Percentage of LAC placed in Independent Fostering Agencies – annual target 25%.
 - Percentage of LAC overall within foster placements – annual target 75%
- 5.2 The overall LAC population increased during the reporting period; from 326 on 30th September 2015 to 328 on 31st December 2015.
- 5.3 As at the 31st December 2015 there were:
- 96 children placed with Brent foster carers compared to 97 children at the end of the previous quarter. This is 30% of the total.
 - 48 children placed with a relative or family friend on a fostering basis compared to 46 children at the end of the previous quarter. This is 15% of the total.
 - 83 children placed with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) compared to 91 children at the end of the previous quarter. This is 25% of the total.
 - 70% of children lived within a fostering setting as at 31st December 2015.
- 5.4 This reporting period continued to see an increase in unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) approaching the borough for support. Between 1st October and 31st December 2015 13 UASC started to receive support; this represents 31% of all children starting to be looked after during this period. During the same period in 2014 11 UASC started to be looked after, representing 16% of children starting to be looked after during the period. The proportion of all Looked After Children who are UASC is now 17.7%, compared to 12.2% in December 2014. A greater number and

proportion of LAC are now residing in semi-independent accommodation - an increase from 10% to 15% between April-December 2015. This reflects the older age range of young people entering the care system within Brent.

- 5.5 The service has fewer internal foster carers approved to look after older teenagers and therefore a growth in new referrals in this age range adversely affects our ability to provide in-house resources.
- 5.6 The number of in-house carer resignations and terminations exceeded approvals in 2014-15 and this has had an adverse impact upon our capacity to provide placements for children in-house (see paragraph 6.6 below). To improve performance our activity has been re-focused – resulting in an increase in enquiries and assessments in progress. This will result in greater capacity within the service and it is anticipated that the proportion of children placed in-house will rise over the next 12 months.
- 5.7 The service operates with few vacancies so that the majority of available space with foster carers is maximised. As at 31st December 2015 there were 15 fostering households with at least one bed space available for fostering. This is approximately 13% of the total capacity of non-related households. The majority of carers with vacancies are approved for younger children and are therefore unsuitable to care for the older range of children becoming looked after.
- 5.8 In response to the need for placements out of office hours and to ensure children and young people are less likely to be found homes at a distance from Brent the service has worked closely with local IFA providers to provide the details of local carers to the Emergency Duty Team should a placement be required. This was in direct response to issues raised in this area by the Ofsted single inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers between September – October 2015.

6.0 Recruitment Activity

- 6.1 The fostering service carried out 11 recruitment focused activities within the reporting period with the aim of raising awareness of fostering and encouraging potential foster carers to come forward. For example as part of the ‘#OurDay tweetathon’ on 18th November, the fostering service promoted ourselves to the wider world as part of the Local Government Association’s campaign to raise awareness of the work done every single day by local councils across the UK: (https://twitter.com/Brent_Council/status/666983441712480257). We also continue to run regular outreach sessions within community spaces and at Wembley ASDA.

- 6.2 The monthly information evenings have continued to be held at the Civic Centre for members of the public to find out more about the fostering role and to enable us to determine whether an individual or family has the potential to become a carer for Brent.
- 6.3 Our improved recruitment and marketing activity has seen a significant growth in enquiries to the service this year in comparison to 2014-15. On current performance we are projecting 300 enquiries this reporting year, compared to 203 in 2014-15. From our own historical data as well as comparisons with other boroughs and IFAs on average 10% of enquiries move ahead to a formal application to foster, with approximately 5-6% of enquiries resulting in an approved fostering household. The recruitment activity during the reporting period produced 42 enquiries about fostering. These enquiries resulted in 9 initial visits. As at the 30th September 2015 there were 19 formal assessments in process under the 2-stage fostering assessment process, a growth of 6 since the previous reporting period.
- 6.4 A 3-month internet based recruitment project with an external provider commenced on 26th December 2015, aiming to target advertising at carers with an interest in fostering older children and sibling groups, as well as from within White Irish and White European communities. The campaign will also assist in the recruitment of foster carers who match the following characteristics:
- Potential foster carers who live in Brent and immediate surrounding areas.
 - Potential foster carers who live in a property with a spare bedroom, especially those with multiple spare bedrooms.
 - Potential foster carers aged between 29 – 59 years.

Google Search and Facebook campaigns are being used to target those actively looking to foster in Brent. The service provider will produce monthly monitoring reports that will assess the impact and success of each digital advertising campaign. The reports will be considered as to whether to extend the programme. A link to more information about the campaign can be found at appendix (ii) below.

- 6.5 The target for the service is to recruit fifteen non-related foster carers during the reporting year with a net growth of 5 fostering households once carer resignations and terminations of approval are taken into account. Fortnightly monitoring of the recruitment process ensures that the recruitment team's performance is scrutinised. Whilst there have been a number of carer resignations, there are a high number of assessments in progress with a projection of 13 completed before 31st March 2016. There have been some delays due to the slow return of DBS forms. This is a systemic issue affecting all fostering agencies within London and has been signalled as a priority area to resolve by the Metropolitan Police.
- 6.6 The service is unlikely to reach the net growth target due to the number of carer terminations. To better understand reasons for carers leaving the service and in order to aid recruitment and retention a survey and analysis of households that had left fostering during the previous was completed. Of those households that responded there was no overriding factor that explained carers' decisions to stop fostering - ranging from a change in personal circumstances to having to deal with an

allegation or a challenging placement. The majority of respondents thought they received good support from the fostering support team; that matching was appropriate and the training on offer was good. Areas where carers were dissatisfied related to the inconsistent support from the child's social worker and not feeling valued by the service as a whole. This analysis will help the service respond to carer needs quickly with the intended outcome that there are greater levels of retention.

7.0 Fostering Panel

7.1 The fostering service has a Fostering Panel constituted in accordance with Regulation 23 of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011. The service maintains a central list of Panel members. The panel chair and vice chair are independent people with professional experience of fostering. The Panel meets on the first Friday of every month and more regularly where there is service demand.

7.2 The functions of the Fostering Panel are to consider:

- Each application and recommend whether or not a person is suitable to be a Foster Carer, 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 fostering service.
- The termination of approval or change of terms of approval of a Foster Carer.

7.3 The panel has a quality assurance role and monitors the standard of reports presented to it and relays any issues or concerns to the relevant manager. The panel makes recommendations to the fostering service and these recommendations are referred to the Agency Decision Maker who is the Operational Director, Children's Social Care.

7.4 During the period 1st October – 31st December 2015 3 panels were held with 17 specific cases discussed during these sessions. Within this group:

- 1 new fostering household and 1 new 'Family and Friends' foster carer household were recommended for approval.
- 11 fostering and 3 family and friends households were found suitable to continue as foster carers following review.
- 1 fostering household's approval was recommended for termination - due to the named child for whom they had been approved having left their care and them not seeking approval for any other child or in pursuing the fostering task.

All of the recommendations made to the Agency Decision Maker were ratified.

7.5 The feedback from the fostering panel chair has been constructive to the service as it develops. Discussions have been held with the chair about how the service could more effectively deal with the issue of allegations against carers to support the reintegration of the household to fostering. The issue of inconsistent children's social worker attendance at panels has been noted. As a result the panel advisor is providing a regular report to the Head of Service for Care Planning to ensure there is

a regular presence, whether within the form of a written report or verbal presentation. At the next panel training day a mock panel will be created, where supervising social workers will be invited to take the roles of panel members. This will improve both panel members and social workers' understanding of the role and what is expected of them in presenting their assessments and reports.

8.0 Training and Support to Foster Carers.

- 8.1 All of Brent's foster carers are allocated to a Supervising Social Worker who carries out monthly supervision and support visits, ensures carers provide a good standard of care and creates an important link between the child's social worker and the foster carer.
- 8.2 As part of foster carers' commitment to Brent and reinforced within their foster care agreement is a requirement to attend mandatory and identified training courses. During the period 1st October – 31st December 2015 13 training courses were held, attended by 91 foster carers. An overall analysis of the impact of foster carer training carried out during the reporting year will be provided with the final quarter's fostering service monitoring report.
- 8.3 Every month a foster carers' support group is held, facilitated by Supervising Social Workers but informed by the needs of carers. The groups are well attended and provide an important communication link between carers and the Placements' Service. A foster carers' focus group was held in October between fostering service managers and carers to share information and discuss issues of concern.
- 8.4 The annual foster carers' awards and celebration evening was held in December and was well-attended by many carers. A number of awards were presented to carers who had gone the 'extra mile' in supporting children in their care. The highlight of the evening was a special award to Patrice Thomas for her fostering career of over 30 years, encompassing the care of more than 150 children. This tremendous achievement was recognised nationally when Patrice was awarded the MBE in the New Year Honours' List. A link to further information is available at appendix (i) below.
- 8.4 A continuation of social pedagogy development through a bridging project to embed the learning of foster carers and social care staff is taking place between October 2015 and April 2016. Meetings have been held with other Local Authorities using a similar approach in order to share practice.

9.0 Monitoring Arrangements

- 9.1 During the reporting period there was one allegation made against the adult son of a Brent foster carer.
- 9.2 There was one formal complaint received from a Brent foster carer during the reporting period. This related to the management of a child with challenging

behaviour and was from the carer whose adult son was subject of an allegation in paragraph 9.1 above.

- 9.3 All foster carers, regardless of the length of their approval with Brent must have an annual review of their arrangements. The Fostering Reviewing Officer completed 29 annual reviews out of a possible 38 during this period. Of those uncompleted, 3 were at the request of the foster carer, 4 were considering resignation from their role and 2 due to supervising social worker delays. These have all been re-scheduled and will be completed within timescales.

10.0 Ofsted Inspection

- 10.1 The Ofsted single inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers took place between 14th September and 8th October 2015. The final report was published on 30th November 2015.

- 10.2 The inspection of fostering services was combined within the overall judgement for children looked after and achieving permanence and as such was judged as 'Requires Improvement'. There were a number of positive findings as they related to fostering:

- That strategic leaders were prioritising sufficiency and proactively targeting foster carer recruitment. The number of potential foster carers under assessment was noted as showing improvement and the duration of assessments were closely monitored to ensure timely approvals.
- That family finding for older children considered the use of long-term foster care, including the use of externally commissioned placements. Inspectors found timely formal matching and good use of connected person's assessments. The ethnic, cultural and religious mix of the local authority's foster carers was confirmed as matching that of the borough with almost all children and young people being well matched with foster carers in this respect.
- That the panel adviser and panel chair provide robust quality assurance and challenge. It was noted that there had been a refocusing of the training agenda since the recent appointment of the fostering development co-ordinator to ensure a skilled workforce to meet the needs of children and to help build stability.
- That carers were very positive about the recent introduction of social pedagogy training; they said that it helps them to develop strategies for managing difficult behaviours and so reduces the chances of placements breaking down and children or young people having to move to new carers.
- Foster carers said that they felt well supported by the fostering service and inspectors found annual foster carer reviews to be of a high standard.

- 10.3 There were a number of areas where inspectors felt that fostering services could be improved:

- To ensure that current strategies aimed at providing a sufficient range and number of placement options for children and young people deliver in providing enough capacity to meet the needs of all children.
- That the local authority's fostering strategy was not meeting its own objective to ensure that Brent has enough foster carers with the right skills to meet the

needs of all of its children looked after. The reasons foster carers leave the fostering service were noted not to be collated and analysed to inform the fostering strategy.

- That foster carer assessments presented to panel were variable in quality with most requiring some additional information or further analysis to fully support good decision making by panel.
- That individual foster carer training plans were not yet ensuring that all foster carers were encouraged by supervising social workers to engage fully in developing their skills and taking up available training.

10.4 The areas noted within the inspection as requiring improvement are part of service action planning to ensure these are effectively tackled.

11.0 Future Developments

11.1 As described above, a social pedagogy bridging programme is in operation between October 2015 until April 2016 to support those who have completed the programme and to share and embed the learning and knowledge more broadly across Children's Social Care. A project plan has been developed with the intention to deliver a second training cohort in 2016. St Christopher's Fellowship are using social pedagogy within their children's homes in west London and are committed to leading a network of organisations committed to this approach. Brent intends to participate within this network.

11.2 Collaborative work with other west London authorities has continued with joint foster carer preparation training now in place and an agreement made to offer the same carer benefits' package to foster carers – delivered through the Fostering Network.

11.3 The main activities for the final quarter of the reporting year are as follows:

- To ensure that the recruitment of in-house carers continues to improve and that the impact of the digital campaign is evaluated.
- To carry out a survey of current foster carers and to compare this with the exit interviews to identify trends and to support service planning.
- To review the foster carer training offer with the intention to provide more targeted activity and to ensure fostering support workers actively promote training and development.
- To progress the plan for social pedagogy implementation within Brent.

Appendices / Links

- (i) Press Release: Brent resident awarded MBE for 31 years of fostering:
<https://www.brent.gov.uk/council-news/press-releases/pr6200/>

(ii) Brent's 'Make a Difference' Fostering Campaign:

<https://www.brent.gov.uk/services-for-residents/children-and-family-support/fostering/make-a-difference/>

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