 Brent	Corporate Parenting Committee 15 July 2020
	Report from the Strategic Director of Children and Young People
Brent Fostering Service Quarterly Monitoring Report: Quarter 4: 1st April to 30th June 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, Looked After Children and Permanency Civic Centre, Engineers Way, Wembley, Brent 020 8937 4382 Nigel Chapman Operational Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes Civic Centre, Engineers Way, Wembley, Brent 020 8937 4091

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 April – 30th June 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 carers are approved and need to be allocated for support when they care for children. All posts are filled with permanent members of staff.

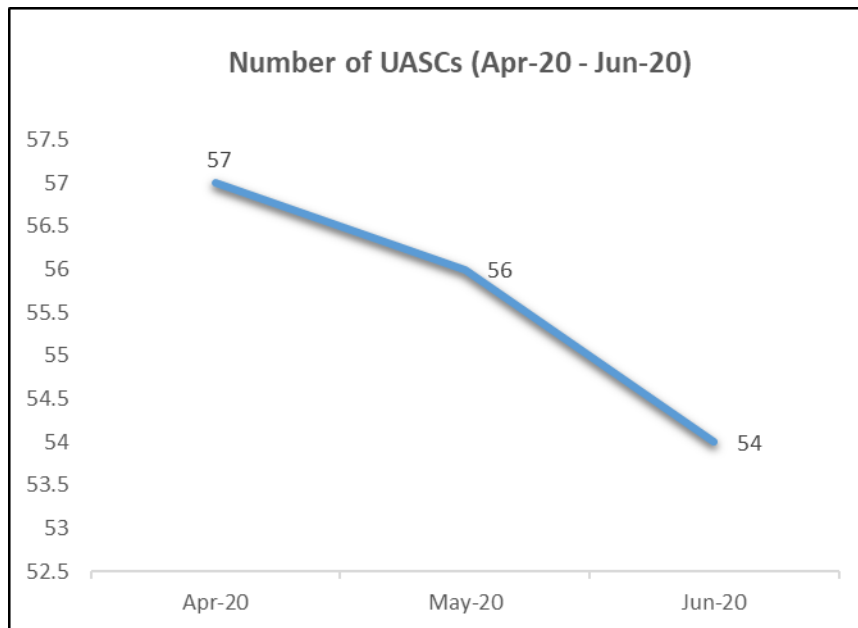
4.0 Placement Activity

- 4.1** The total number of looked after children as at 30th June 2020 was 292, which is a reduction of 2 children from Q4 2019-2020 (294 children) and a decrease of 14 children from the same period in 2019.

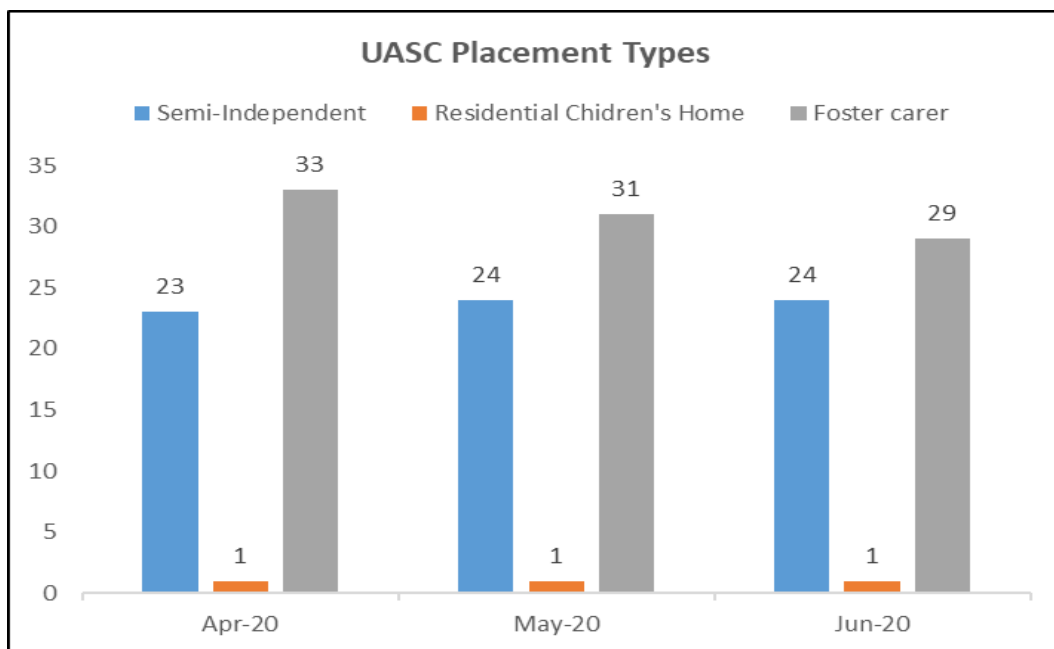
4.2 The corporate performance targets for 2020/2021 are as below:

- Percentage of looked after children placed with in-house (Brent) foster carers – annual target 30% - the actual percentage as of 30th June 2020 was 23% (67 children), a slight decrease from the previous quarter Q4 of 2019-2020, 23.8% (70 children).
- Percentage of looked after children placed with a relative or family friend – annual target 15% - the actual percentage as of 30th June 2020 was 12.3% (36 children), an increase from Q4, 2019-2020 (9.9%, 29 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 30th June 2020 was 24.7% (72 children); a decrease from Q4, 2019-2020 (26.9%, 79 children).
- Percentage of looked after children overall within foster placements – annual target 70% - the actual percentage as of 30th June 2020 was 60% (175 children), a slight decrease from 60.5% (178 children) at the end of Q4, 2019-2020.
- There were 50 looked after children in registered semi-independent accommodation (residential accommodation not subject to Children's Home Regulations) as at 30th June 2020, which represents 17.1% of all looked after children. This is a reduction from the 18.4% total at the end of Q4, 2019-2020.

4.3 As of 30th June 2020 there were 54 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), 6 fewer than at the end of Q4, 2019– 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic has seen a nationwide reduction in the number of UASC presenting for assistance from local authorities. From March to May 2020, the number of new UASC arrivals in Brent has dropped. However, there were 5 new arrivals in May and June, which is consistent with the pre-Covid-19 period. A large number of new UASC arrivals are predicted from August this year as some UASC may have been unable to move across mainland Europe during the Covid-19 outbreak.



4.4 The majority of UASC are placed in semi-independent accommodation (24, 1 fewer than the end of Q4, 2019-20), or in foster care (29), five less than at the end of Q4, 2019 – 20.



5.0 Recruitment and Assessment

5.1 Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, Brent Fostering has maintained fostering recruitment activity and saw an increase in the number of enquiries and

information evening attendees. Brent launched the 'Help vulnerable children' campaign with the support of the Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Safeguarding, Early Help and Social Care, which saw high engagement from community members who expressed their interest in fostering.

- 5.2** All marketing activity during this period has been carried out online through the Brent Council website, the Brent Council newsletter, the Fostering newsletter, and social media. Enquiries were made by interested parties via the phone or online; initial visits and the assessment process were then carried out through video calls. 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 us to plan for more virtual events moving forward.
- 5.3** During this period the Marketing and Recruitment Officer (MRO) released a fostering information pack that has a new and 'fresh' design. The information pack can be downloaded from the website and will also be used for marketing on social media. <https://www.brent.gov.uk/services-for-residents/children-and-family-support/fostering/fostering-information-pack/>
- 5.4** The MRO continued sending emails to newsletter subscribers, the number of which doubled between April and June. There are currently 1,439 subscribers to the fostering newsletter. To engage with subscribers, content has been created in various forms, including: quizzes; surveys; blog articles; interviews with foster carers and fostering information videos. This has been a successful addition to the marketing strategy – the content produced counts for over half of the total number of web visits to the fostering pages on the Brent Council website. By the end of the reporting trimester there was a total of 10,000 unique website visits to these pages.
- 5.5** Overall, an increase has been recorded from online marketing tactics during the reporting period in comparison to previous months. This may be due to people staying at home and spending more time online. A total of 34 contacts (information evening bookings and other requests for information) and 37 enquiries (requests to apply for fostering made via the website or phone) have been made.
- 5.6** 21 initial visits were booked between April and June 2020 (this is a result of enquiries outside the reporting period as well). Eight of the initial visits resulted in the applicants being recommended for stage 1 of the assessment process.
- 5.7** Of the 3 assessments in stage 1 in the last reporting period:

 - 2 have moved to stage 2

- 1 remains in stage 1 due to the delay in progressing the medical caused by Covid-19 restrictions.

5.8 The assessment recorded in the last quarterly report as being in stage 2 was heard at fostering panel in May and the couple were successfully recommended to foster.

5.9 In this reporting period there are 10 assessments underway:

- 8 in Stage 1; and
- 2 in Stage 2, which will be presented to the fostering panel in September and October 2020 respectively.

6.0 Fostering Panel

6.1 The LACP Service 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. Panels take a little longer due to having to “invite” applicants and workers into the meeting at different times via the application but some practices have been condensed in order to compensate for this so this way of working may be retained for less complex cases.

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 April – 30th June 2020, 5 panels were held with 10 specific cases discussed during these sessions. Within these cases:

- 1 fostering household was found suitable to continue as foster carers following review;
- 1 fostering household reluctantly resigned from their fostering role due to a change in their personal circumstances;
- The approval of 1 'family and friends' carer ceased due to the young person in their care turning 18;
- 6 new 'family and friends' fostering households were recommended for approval; and
- 1 new fostering household was recommended for approval.

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 Fostering Development Coordinator, who arranges training for foster carers, has reported that no face to face training was offered to carers due to COVID - 19. However all carers have access to the online training. The training courses offered range in topics from 'Bullying & Impulsive Behaviour Training', to 'Child and Parental Substance abuse' and 'Finance for Foster Carers Workshops'. Feedback from foster carers has been positive on online training. Some of the examples were as below:

- *"I have enjoyed doing the online training at home, I can do it in my own time and its manageable";*
- *"I enjoyed the finance training. It was very good; I got more understanding of what to do. It was worthwhile";*
- *' (Online courses are) Ideal for baby carers, as you can stop and start the courses as and when needed, which is great for me*

Supervising social workers and the Fostering Development Coordinator continue to emphasise the importance of attending training to foster carers in their visits.

Uptake regarding the online training has been positive. This is evidenced by the increase in sign up from carers, and course completion. 29 carers have signed up during this time and have completed more than one course each.

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 have offered carers training courses through zoom and are planning webinars. More detail will be provided in the next reporting period.

7.2 Support from supervising social workers

7.2.1 The feedback received from foster carers is consistently positive in relation to the support they receive from their allocated supervising social workers, their managers and the wider fostering service. Some examples of the feedback received are as below:

“The team manager and my SSW provided me with excellent support regarding any issues I may have regarding my placement and especially after the allegation was made both workers were very supportive; keeping in touch weekly, just having someone to talk to as I could not talk to my family due to data protection, I just said young person moved to kinship placement. It was very helpful for me to have them there.”

7.2.2 At the Foster carers Support group on 9th June 2020, the foster carers expressed their gratitude and appreciation to the department for the support provided to them, particularly during this difficult time. Despite all visits being conducted virtually and heightened anxiety for carers around managing the additional risk Covid-19 poses for them, their families and the children in their care, they spoke of feeling well-supported, and communication being regular and appreciated. They stated that the department made the right decision to pay their fostering allowance ahead of time to prevent any financial hardship.

7.2.3 A virtual meeting was held with foster carers on 9th June 2020 to discuss the annual summer seaside trip and the foster carers' celebration event at the end of the year. Foster carers were hopeful to be able to have some form of get-together despite the current situation – amongst the suggestions made were: a picnic in a park in the summer and/or the department funding the foster carers to attend a show in the West End or Wembley Arena if it is safe to do so later in the year. This is still in a discussion stage and no firm decisions have been made. The carers and workers are mindful of following government advice around social distancing and bringing households together.

8.0 Monitoring – reviews, allegations, complaints

8.1 A total of 17 foster carer annual review meetings were conducted during the period

- 8.2** During this quarter, there was one complaint made by a former foster carer who was supporting a care leaver via Staying Put arrangements. This is being dealt with by the respective Service Manager and Team Manager.

9.0 New Developments

9.1 Update on Joint Fostering Feasibility Project

The Committee has previously been informed about the work Brent has been leading on following a successful bid to Department for Education (DfE) seed funding to scope work using a regional approach to fostering. The work has continued with involvement of Ealing and Hounslow Council. Given the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a delay by the DfE in progressing to the next stage of this work, which is to devise a pilot project based on the findings from a Fostering Feasibility Study undertaken earlier in the year. The focus would remain on developing closer working arrangements to improve placement stability and choice for adolescent children in the care system between Hounslow, Ealing and Brent.

It is anticipated that funding will be made available later this year to continue with this work and target carers for the more challenging 11 – 15 year olds to prevent them being placed in residential units. To this end, the Heads of Service in Brent and Ealing have remained in communication and the costs in relation to designing a central web platform to bring together the initial enquiries for the interested local authorities have been sought from the relevant Directors of Children Services. A further update will be provided to the next Committee.