



APPENDIX 1

London Borough of Brent Permanency and Adoption Policy: A first class service for children

Introduction

Every child has the right to a stable, loving and permanent family to care for them, to promote their physical, intellectual and emotional development, and to enable them to achieve their full potential. For the vast majority of children, this is best provided by the family of their birth. Brent Council provides services to promote the ability of families to care for their children effectively and strives to ensure that children continue to live with their families whenever possible.

Where children cannot be cared for by their own family, the Council safeguards their welfare by looking after them – in line with the 10 Key Principles of the Social Services Children's Policy. There are currently approximately 400 children looked after by the council at any one time. Many of these children will in time return to live with their families with the help of social services. Where this is not possible, the Council is responsible for finding alternative permanent family homes for children. There are currently 125 children living in a permanent placement.

For the children who cannot live with their parents, Brent Council will seek to provide a number of different permanent or long term arrangements according to the needs of each child. This may be by way of four different routes:

Long Term Fostering	currently 44 children
Adoption	currently 17 children
Family and Friends carer	currently 43 children, half of whom placed permanently
Residence Orders	currently 21 children

In the first instance, Brent Council will explore the possibility of finding a permanent home within their extended family or with any member of their community with whom they may have a special relationship. The Council will seek to support and enhance these relationships by means of encouraging people to take up residence orders or by a long term fostering relationship and by paying an allowance where necessary. The Council will also seek to

involve the child's family in the planning for the child. Where necessary the Council will consider holding Family Group Conferences so that the entire extended family may be involved in the planning for the child.

Where it is not possible to place a child within his own family or community, the Council will look to finding carers outside of the child's community through adoption or long term foster care – to meet the child's needs for protection and permanency.¹

For younger children and especially for those children who are under five years of age, adoption is considered to be most secure, stable and effective option for providing permanency. For older children and for those who may have significant links and identification with their families of origin, long term fostering may well be the preferred option, although adoption will also be considered. However, the council will always take into account the child's right to maintain their own identity and their need to maintain links with their family of origin.

In providing an alternative permanent home for a child, Brent Council will always endeavour to give full and thorough consideration to establishing the best possible permanency plan for each child in accordance with each child's needs, wishes and feelings and identity. Children who are not able to live with their own immediate families should have plans for permanency considered without unnecessary delay and at the most appropriate point in their lives. Brent Council will always seek to find and place a child with a family that best matches its ethnic and cultural background. However, it will not deny a child a chance of a permanent home if it proves impossible to find a family matching its ethnicity and culture within a reasonable period of time.²

The Council will seek to minimise delay by making clear and timely referrals to Placements duty system.

The Initial Permanency Planning Meeting will take into account the full range of options available to the child, including care by the extended family, as well as adoption. In addition, where appropriate, the initial PPM will also set in motion "Twin Track" or "Parallel" planning whereby plans for alternative permanent placements are made at the same time as plans are made for rehabilitation to the family of origins. This is to avoid unnecessary delay should one of these options prove not to be viable.

Thereafter, Brent Placements will endeavour to find appropriate carers to meet the needs of the particular child by regular and consistent planning by the department.

Overall Aim

To provide a high quality adoption and permanency service for children which ensures that, if they cannot live with their own family, they will be able to be brought up in a permanent family that best meets their needs.

Targets

Brent Council will set local targets to achieve the targets for adoption set by the Government as well as objectives in providing alternative permanent families for children where adoption is not appropriate. These will include permanent placements within the family or with a member of the child's community with whom the child may have a special relationship.

The Government has set new national adoption targets:

Maximising the contribution adoption can make to providing permanent families for children without compromising on quality, so maintaining current levels of adoptive placement stability. Specifically, by bringing councils' practice up to the level of the best, by 2004-05:

- *To increase by 40% the number of looked after children who are adopted, and aim to exceed this by achieving, if possible, a 50% increase, up from 2700 in 1999-00;*
- *To increase to 95% the proportion of looked after children placed for adoption within 12 months of the decision that adoption is in the child's best interests, up from 81% in 2000-01.*

The quality of adoptive placements will be measured by the proportion of adoptive placements that breakdown. The Government's aim is to maintain current quality measured in this way.

Council Corporate Values

- Children are entitled to grow up as part of a loving family which can meet their needs during childhood and beyond.
- It is best for children where possible to be brought up by their own birth family.
- The child's needs for safety welfare will always be at the centre of the permanency planning process, and the child's welfare will always be the paramount consideration in making decisions about their future.
- The child's own identity and links to their family will always be encouraged and actively maintained and supported.³
- Every child, whatever their social or ethnic background, language, culture, religion, gender, sexuality or disability, is entitled to a high standard of service based on a thorough assessment of their individual needs.
- The child's wishes and feelings will be actively sought and fully taken into account at all stages.
- Wherever possible, the child's own family will be consulted and involved in establishing a plan which best meets the child's needs.⁴

The Council will consider holding a Family Group Conference with an independent chair to actively involve the birth and the extended family in the planning process, where it is considered to be necessary. Prospective

permanent carers or adopters will be welcomed and assessed on the basis of their individual circumstances against clear, fair and open criteria. These criteria will not arbitrarily exclude categories of people, on grounds such as marital status, financial status or age.⁵

- Delay in settling a child's long term future can have a severe impact on the health and development of children and will be avoided wherever possible.
- A first class adoption and permanency service requires effective corporate working between Council departments, in particular Health and Education and good partnerships between agencies.
- Services should be provided efficiently and represent good value for money.
- We are committed to using research evidence to improve services.
- We are committed to providing high quality permanency and adoption support services for parents, children and birth families.⁶

For children

- We will take a child centred approach to adoption and permanency. This includes actively seeking and taking into account the child's wishes and feelings in age appropriate ways.
- A permanent placement with long term foster carers, family and friends carers, applicants for a residence order or adoption always involves difficult judgements and decisions. The child's best interest will always be the guiding principle in making these.
- Adoption and other permanency allowances are paid where a child needs and circumstances require it in order to secure an alternative home. This will occur in certain circumstances where specific criteria are met. This decision is made at Brent's Adoption and Permanency Panel.
- Delays will be minimised as far as possible and time scales for decisions and action will take account of the child's age and needs.
- Brent has a rich and diverse population. Brent Council will value a child's cultural, ethnic religious and linguistic background and will not discriminate against any aspect of their identity. Usually it is in the child's best interests to be placed with a family which shares this background, but we will not deny a child the chance of a permanent home, including adoption, if it proves impossible to find a family with similar characteristics within a reasonable time.⁷
- Where a child with a disability requires a permanent placement they will receive equal service to meet their individual needs.
- Where brothers and sisters need to be found alternative permanent homes, it is normally best for them to be placed together. If this is inappropriate or impossible, we will carefully consider possibilities for maintaining contact between siblings.⁸
- We will prioritise recruiting and assessing families who are most likely to meet the needs of local children who need permanent families.⁹

For their birth family

- We will work to enable children to live with their own birth families wherever possible, and provide high quality services to support families in this challenging task.
- We will deal sensitively with issues of contact, and where it is in a child's best interests to remain in contact with their birth family after Adoption and Long Term Fostering we will seek to facilitate this.
- We will offer independent counselling to birth parents during the adoption proceedings.¹⁰
- We will consider holding Family Group Conferences to involve the family in the planning for a child. We will consider appointing an independent chair to organise the conference.

For prospective permanent carers, for example long term foster carers, adopters, family and friends carers and those applying for residence orders

- Prospective carers will be welcomed and responded to quickly and politely. They will be treated with respect and without discrimination throughout the adoption/permanency process. There will be clearly defined time scales for assessments.¹¹
- Prospective carers will be thoroughly assessed according to fair, clear and open criteria.¹²
- The key criterion is that permanent carers can offer a safe, stable and loving home throughout¹³ childhood and beyond and demonstrate an understanding of a child's needs. Brent will aim to prioritise applicants who are able to meet the needs of the children who require permanent homes.
- We will communicate openly with applicants about our priorities, procedures and assessments.
- Assessing an applicant as a permanent carer rightly means going into a lot of depth, and exploring personal and often difficult areas. However, assessments will always be approached with sensitivity and on the basis of strict confidentiality.¹⁴
- Tailored support by way of preparation groups, ongoing training groups, support groups and visits from multi-disciplinary professionals will be offered to all permanent carers.

After Adoption

- We will ensure that a high quality adoption support service is available to adoptive parents and children. Brent Council has a post adoption team, which provides support services to adopted families as well as birth families. In addition, the adoption social workers will continue to support the adoptive families for one year following the making of an adoption order.¹⁵

- The above service will provide a social work service for adoptive families requesting advice on parenting and behaviour to include home visits when necessary. Where necessary work with children will also be provided.
- An independent telephone helpline for both parents and children is available from the Post Adoption Centre to which Brent Council is a subscriber.
- Brent's Post Adoption service will provide newsletters, training events and up to date information on adoption issues and arrange group events for families.
- Birth record counselling, information and advice will be provided for adopted adults and their birth families who want to know more about their family history.
- Adopted people will also receive assistance in tracing their birth families, if that is what they wish, and a post adoption social worker will act as an intermediary once the adopted person has found their birth family member. Support will be provided for adoptive parents where adult children are contacting birth families.
- The post adoption service will attempt to contact adopted people on behalf of the birth families where that is requested. All identifying information in regard to the adopted person will be kept confidential.
- Where the birth record counsellor is unable to trace the adopted person, a referral will be made to NORCAP who will endeavour to trace the adopted person. All information supplied to NORCAP is held on a strictly confidential basis. For each case Brent Council will set up a non-disclosure agreement with NORCAP.
- In addition to the above, the post adoption team will facilitate post adoption contact where this has been agreed. This may be letter box contact once or twice a year, when mail is re-directed in accordance with agreements made at the time of adoption, or face to face contact with birth families at agreed times. ¹⁶

After Long Term Fostering and Family and Friends Fostering

- Children and young people placed within a Long Term Foster Family, whether within their own extended family network or with substitute long term carers will at some point come to the time when they will need to leave care and live independently. Some may move into semi independent accommodation, others might choose to live with birth parents, some may move into their own accommodation at 18 years and some may wish to stay on within the foster home after their 18th birthday until they feel more ready to make the transition into independence.
- Brent Council has a responsibility to assess the needs of children who have been in care for a significant period prior to their 16th birthday with a view to supporting these young people between 16 and 21 years.
- Young people with disabilities may remain in their foster placement until their 19th birthday and Brent would have a responsibility to support

all young people after care – usually to 21 years old although this could be up to 24 years old in some cases.

- The Children Act 1989 Section 24 and the Children Leaving care Act 2001 makes provisions for Local Authorities to provide services to young people to improve the process of transition, to improve preparation and planning, to improve personal support and to improve financial support to young people.
- Young people will be referred to the Leaving Care Team for appropriate support prior to and after leaving care. It will be the leaving care team's responsibility to ensure that a Pathway Plan is formulated, that the young person is allocated a personal advisor on leaving care and that adequate financial arrangements are put in place for the young person prior to them leaving care. The leaving care policy should be referred to with regards to more detailed information that can be supplied to young people about after care support.
- The Long Term Fostering Team will continue to provide ongoing supervision and support to all Long Term Foster Carers until the young person has left their care and is able to live independently.
- The Long Term Fostering Team will continue to have an ongoing relationship with approved carers who are able to offer new placements to looked after children once a current placement has ended.

After Residence Orders

- Brent Placements Services will continue to work with the Residence Order applicant until the residence order assessment is completed and submitted to the court.
- A Residence Order settles the arrangements with whom a child is to live, and if the child has been Looked After by Brent under a Care Order, this ends and the Care Order is rescinded.
- The holder of the Residence Order acquires Parental Responsibility, but unlike Adoption the order has some restrictions and leaves some rights with the child's parents.
- If the Residence Order is granted Brent Children Services may continue to be involved with the Residence Order holder to support contact arrangements for an agreed transitional period until the Residence Order holder can manage this themselves.
- The Residence Order holder may apply for child benefit once the young person is placed.
- Brent Placements Services may be involved in ensuring that any agreed support package is put in place prior to the child being placed with the applicant e.g. referral to CAMHS service, Welfare Rights advice etc.
- Brent Placements services will on request work with the Residence Order applicant or holder to assess eligibility for Residence Order Allowances.
- The Residence Order Allowance is a means tested allowance, which is reviewed on an annual basis.

- A Residence Order normally lasts until a young person is 16 unless the court discharges it at an earlier date. In exceptional circumstances the order can continue until the young person is 18 years. This can be specified at the time the order is made or before the order expires. All orders cease on the young person's 18th birthday.
- The Leaving care service extended to young people who have been looked after by Brent will not apply to young people who are subject to a Residence Order. The Residence Order holder will need to ensure that they can meet the young person's need for support once the order expires.

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Adoption & Permanency Policy
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¹ National Minimum Standards, Regulations. Local Authority Services in England 2003 "The Adoption agency has written plans for the implementation and evaluation of effective strategies to recruit sufficient adopters to meet the needs of the range of children waiting for adoption locally" UK National Standards for Foster Care 21.1 "Each Authority ensures access to a supply of foster carers which meets the needs of the children and young people within it's area"

² Standard 7.2 "Children are matched with adopters who best meet their assessed needs. Wherever possible, this will be a family which reflects their ethnic origin, cultural background and language and allows them to live with brothers and sisters, unless this will not meet their individually assessed need".

³ Standard 18.1 and 18.2 "Birth families are enabled to contribute to the maintenance of their child's heritage. Efforts are made to obtain for the child clear and appropriate information from the birth parents on themselves and life before the child's adoption. This will include information about the child's birth, early life, and provide up to date information about themselves and their situation".

⁴ Standard 17.2 "The adoption agency works with birth parents to enable effective plans to be made and implemented for their children."

⁵ Standard 13.1 "Plans for recruitment will specify that people interested in becoming adoptive parents will be welcomed without prejudice, will be given clear written information about the preparation, assessment and approval procedure and that they will be treated fairly, openly and with respect throughout the adoption process".

⁶ Standard 16.1 "Adoptive parents are helped and supported to provide stable and permanent homes for the children placed with them". Standard 17.1 "The service to birth parents recognises the lifelong implications of adoption".

⁷ Standard 7.2 Standard 7.1 National Minimum Standards.

⁸ Standard 7.2

⁹ Standard 13.2 "A copy of the written eligibility criteria, information on becoming adoptive parents and what is expected of adopters is provided on request..."

¹⁰ Standard 19.1 "The Adoption agency has a clear strategy for working with and supporting birth parents and birth families (including siblings). This includes providing information about local and national support groups and services and helping birth parents to fulfil agreed plans for contact".

¹¹ Standard 13.1

¹² Standard 14.1 "Prospective adopters are involved in a formal, thorough and comprehensive assessment, preparation and approval process".

¹³ Standard 6.1 National Minimum Standards. Standard 6 UK National Standards for Foster Care

¹⁴ Standard 14.7 “Prospective carers are prepared to become adoptive parent/s in a sensitive way which addresses the issues they are likely to encounter and identifies the competencies and strengths they have or will need to develop”. Standard 22.1 National Minimum Standards. Standard 13 UK National Standards for Foster Care

¹⁵ Standard 16.1 “Adoptive parents are helped and supported to provide stable and permanent homes for the children placed with them”.

¹⁶ Standard 19.1