



Corporate Parenting Committee

Monday 29 April 2024 at 5.00 pm

Members' Suite - Brent Civic Centre, Engineers Way,
Wembley HA9 0FJ

This meeting has been rescheduled to take place on Monday 29 April 2024. The meeting will be held as an in person physical meeting with all members of the Committee required to attend in person.

The press and public will be excluded from this meeting.

Membership:

Members

Councillors:

Grahl (Chair)

Collymore

Dixon

Gbajumo

Hirani

Substitute Members

Councillors:

Chappell, Conneely, Kennelly
and Rubin

Councillors: Maurice and Mistry

For further information contact: Hannah O'Brien, Senior 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/democracy

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 - 10
<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 and Care Leavers in Action Representatives	
<p>This is an opportunity for members of Care In Action (CIA) and Care Leavers in Action (CLIA) to feedback on recent activity.</p>	
8 Brent Virtual School Annual Report 2022-23	11 - 28

To inform the Corporate Parenting Committee of the work undertaken by the Brent Virtual School and school results for Looked After Children in the 2022-23 academic year. The delay in presenting this report is due to the need for exam reports to be ratified.

9 Brent Fostering Service 6-Monthly Monitoring Report: 1 October 2023 to 31 March 2024 29 - 48

To provide information to the 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).

10 Brent Adoption Report 6-Monthly Update: 1 October 2023 to 31 April 2024 49 - 60

To provide information to the Council's Corporate Parenting Committee in relation to adoption performance, progress and activity of Adopt London West, and good outcomes being achieved for children.

11 Any other urgent business

Notice of items to be raised under this heading must be given in writing to the Deputy Director – Democratic Services or their representative before the meeting in accordance with Standing Order 60.



MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE Monday 5 February 2024 at 5.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Grahl (Chair), and Councillors Collymore, Dixon, Gbajumo and Hirani

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**

None.

3. **Declarations of interests**

None.

4. **Deputations (if any)**

None received.

5. **Minutes of the previous meeting**

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the last meeting, held on 16 October 2023, be approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

6. **Matters arising (if any)**

None.

7. **Update from Care In Action / Care Leavers in Action Representatives**

J (Care Leavers in Action) informed the Committee that the group had been involved in a commissioning project focused on services supporting young people not in employment, education or training (NEET). This had involved reviewing answers from bidders, evaluating their pros and cons, and giving each bidder score ratings. This had been a new experience for the majority of the group as it was different to how they had been involved in commissioning previously. Care Leavers in Action (CLIA) were also involved in the work on the new Participation Strategy, looking to improve participation for all children and young people, including developing more opportunities for co-design of services. The strategy was currently out for consultation with CLIA and Care in Action (CIA) and the Voice and Influence Subgroup had discussed it and proposed a young person friendly version of the strategy so that it was clear what children and young people should be expecting in terms

of participation. In terms of social activity, CLIA and CIA had went bowling and had a Christmas meal.

K (Care Leavers in Action) added that the groups had done a trip to London Zoo during the October half term, and it had been good for the different age groups to mix together. Care experienced young people had been taking part in interview panels for the recruitment of Social Workers, Personal Advisers and the Participation Team and would be conducting some more soon, and CLIA was focusing on recruiting more care experienced young people to the CLIA and CIA groups. In terms of planning for the future, the group was planning a residential.

The Chair thanked those present for their contributions and invited members of the Committee to ask questions to the CIA / CLIA representatives. The following questions were raised:

The Committee heard that there had been some discussions around how best young people might contribute to Corporate Parenting Committee in future, and there were plans for a mini workshop to take place at the next meeting to hear how young people think the Committee could be improved.

The Committee thanked the representatives for the updates and **RESOLVED**:

That the updates by the representatives of Care in Action/Care Leavers in Action be noted.

8. **Progress Report - The London Protocol on Reducing Criminalisation of Looked After Children and Care Leavers**

Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) introduced the report, which provided a progress update on the London protocol for reducing the criminalisation of Looked After Children (LAC) and Care Leavers and the MOPAC London wide guidance. In introducing the report, she highlighted the following key points:

- The key objectives of the work focused on providing a practice model that aimed to introduce and improve preventative measures, reduce re-offending behaviour and rehabilitate young people who had offended through effective joint working between relevant agencies. The protocol highlighted the impact of previous trauma, attachments issues and specific vulnerabilities of LAC and care leavers. As such, the protocol encouraged agencies to use a trauma-informed approach to practice as well as restorative approaches in a child-centred way to enable integrated, coordinated, and proactive responses to prevent and address challenging offending behaviour.
- It had been found that care experienced children were six times more likely to be criminalised than any other group of children, and just over half of care experienced children would have a criminal conviction by the age of 24 compared to 10% of their non-care experienced peers.
- Although LAC were overrepresented in the UK Youth Justice System, the number of LAC supervised by Brent's Youth Justice Service had halved in the three years between 2021-23.
- Brent continued to focus on the issue of equality and disproportionality in regard to criminalisation, because young people from Black heritage groups were currently overrepresented in the data.
- Priorities for the next year included:
 - exploring how the local authority could work together with accommodation provider forums to reduce the criminalisation of LAC and care leavers by

ensuring staff responses to behavioural difficulties which may be viewed as criminal were proportionate and appropriate and the need for police involvement / court action was minimised.

- training for Foster Carers focused on de-escalation.
- training for Personal Advisors around providing advocacy when supporting young people in prison.
- Implementation of a joint staff forum with LAC providers and the Youth Justice Service.

The Chair thanked Kelli Eboji for her introduction and invited contributions from the Committee, with the following points raised:

Representatives from CLIA asked whether there were any interactive sessions and workshops available to care leavers and LAC to prevent them from going into the Youth Justice System, particularly focused on addressing the statistics included in the report, which they felt would be motivating for young people. They were advised that each individual had their own complexities around prevention. In section 5.15 of the report there were details of 'Your Choice', which was a programme providing training to practitioners working with young people at medium to high risk of harm teaching Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) techniques to use during the delivery of interventions with young people in the programme. The programme had recently started being offered in the LAC and Permanency Service, and was already offered within the Accelerated Support Team and Youth Justice Service. This programme was known to have positive outcomes and it was hoped that by the time young people left care they had removed themselves from criminality and were focused on their future. For young care leavers in custody, they were offered supported accommodation when they left and offered key worker sessions with their probation officer and personal adviser to prevent future escalation.

In relation to the de-escalation training available for foster carers which was a priority for the following year, CLIA representatives highlighted that many foster carers and semi-independent providers may not be aware of that opportunity and asked for further promotion of those sessions. The Committee asked whether the training was being provided because it was common for foster carers to escalate issues to the police, and CLIA representatives highlighted that there was a tendency for foster carers to jump to conclusions and escalate to the police in the first instance if anything went wrong. Kelli Eboji thanked CLIA for the insights. She felt it was important to start that conversation with foster carers through the training and keep that dialogue open to minimise escalation and instead consider what they would do if it were their own child.

The Committee asked for further information around disproportionality and whether there was an action plan to address that. Palvinder Kudhail (Director Integration and Improved Outcomes, Brent Council) highlighted that there were regular discussions about disproportionality and closing that gap. Staff had been through anti-racism training and the service ensured that learning from intense interventions was put into practice and responses were focused on the individual. The Youth Justice Service in Brent had a monthly session with young people which usually included a guest speaker to talk about different topics. Some of the speakers had been involved in the youth justice system in some way in the past and had turned their lives around so these talks were often motivating for young people. It was agreed that the report presented the following year would provide progress updates against the action plan.

The Committee acknowledged that transitions could be a challenging time for children and young people, such as leaving placements and leaving the Youth Justice System from child focused to adult focused. Afzal Ahmed (Service Manager – Leaving Care, Brent Council)) agreed that transitions were challenging which was why the Council had a Transitions

Panel which focused on young people in custody due to be rehabilitated into the community. There were early indicators to identify who those young people were, and the Council had developed good relationships with youth offending institutes to plan a pathway early for that young person with their dedicated support officer. That meant that when the young person left custody, they had very clear objectives and actions and were offered intense key worker support within semi-independent provision. That work was done in conjunction with the young person's Probation Officer and focused on de-escalation, engaging them in activities and giving them functional skills to help them realise what they could achieve.

The Committee were unfamiliar with the Home Office Disruption Toolkit and asked for further information on what that was. Afzal Ahmed explained that the toolkit was relevant to practitioners involved in the safeguarding of children and provided advice and guidance on disrupting child exploitation. In response to what happened when the Council were made aware that a child who had been a victim of criminal exploitation was in court, Afzal Ahmed explained that if a young person was known to have been exploited they would have been referred through the National Referral Mechanism and relevant agencies would be aware, including the police and probation, who would then ensure that any preventative work took that information into account.

The Committee noted that the paper detailed positive working with courts to make them more sensitive to the needs and challenges of young people's experiences and asked whether the courts had an insufficient understanding of the challenges of growing up in care and discrimination. Kelli Eboji highlighted that the courts tended to lack an understanding of the vulnerabilities of care experienced young people. One way the Council combatted that was to ensure Social Workers and Youth Justice Workers were working closely together so that when court reports were prepared that information was available and clear to the courts. Discrimination was being tackled through having open dialogue sessions with magistrates to remind them of discrimination and disproportionality and call that out.

The Committee highlighted that a key risk for LAC was being targeted for county lines and asked how the Exploitation, Violence and Vulnerability Panel (EVVP) took action on that specific risk. Afzal Ahmed highlighted that the EVVP worked as a safety planning mechanism. For example, if a young person was at risk of county lines there would be relevant agencies present at the panel to review the case, such as the police and commissioning colleagues, who could make decisions regarding that case. The Panel had a multi-agency framework for looking at one at-risk person and the mechanisms for keeping them safe, and there was a lot of resources and input there from different professionals to prevent further risks.

The Committee asked for historical data to be included in future reports so that they could review any trends and assure themselves that the work was improving.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the content of the report and progress made since the introduction of the London Protocol on reducing the criminalisation of looked after children and care leavers.
- ii) To advocate in support of the key principles set out within the London Protocol on behalf of looked after children and care leavers when exercising their duties as corporate parents.

9. Progress Report - Revised Fostering Offer

Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) introduced the revised fostering offer by presenting a short video explaining the benefits of being a foster carer in Brent. In introducing the report, she highlighted the following points:

- A key emphasis over the next year was around promoting the local authority fostering offer, utilising marketing techniques such as the newly created video referenced in section 4.9.3 of the report and competing with independent agencies in the wider market.
- The report detailed a 6-month programme of work, approved by Council Management Team, exploring ways to improve and increase placement sufficiency and save money in terms of the large amounts being spent on semi-independent agencies.
- The revised offer was due to be implemented in April 2024. The background and rationale for the changes in the offer was that, between 2017 and 2023, there was an almost 40% reduction of in-house capacity in Brent fostering households and beds / placements. This was being experienced nationwide, where nationally around 1/8th of fostering households left their roles in 2021-22.
- Brent currently had 23 fostering households aged 65 or over, and part of forward planning was around recruitment of foster carers when those older carers retired.
- As a result of the national reduction of fostering households, Brent had become reliant on commissioning independent fostering agencies, so the Council had looked to improve recruitment through the revised offer to avoid costly independent placements.
- Section 4.1.4 of the report highlighted that benchmarking showed the allowance offer previously was not competitive compared to Brent's West London neighbours, so the first priority for the revised offer had been to look at that, and section 4.2 outlined the different elements of the new offer, including an increase in the weekly fostering allowance and a new digital offer for foster carers, as well as leisure offers.
- The offer also introduced a range of initiatives to support placement stability, including a LAC resilience service which was a new programme in the test and learn phase.
- The service was working with HR to make Brent a foster friendly organisation and was developing policies in line with that approach. Alongside this work was being done with West London colleagues to work towards a joint fostering recruitment hub.

The Chair thanked officers for the update and invited comments and questions from Committee members with the following raised:

In relation to the weekly fostering allowance, the Committee asked whether there was a connection between a higher allowance and an increase in the recruitment of foster carers. Kelli Eboji advised there was no direct correlation that could be evidenced, but there were higher levels of enquiries with increased weekly allowances. Brent had identified itself as operating in a competitive area with many fostering agencies within Brent and its border. Many boroughs were offering more, and Brent was losing its constituents to those boroughs and the independent sector which often offered double the allowance offered by local authorities. In response to whether nominated carers receive an allowance or training, the Committee was advised that nominated carers were typically not paid an allowance, although if they provided respite care for the foster carer then there would be an agreement with the foster carer that they would contribute to the costs associated with that. This was not an additional expense for the Council and agreed within the fostering household. The support programmes on offer with the revised offer would be made available for the whole fostering network so nominated carers would benefit from that.

The Committee asked about the offer of Council tax exemption and how that would work. Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) explained that the Council currently offered Council tax exemptions for Brent care leavers regardless of where in the UK they lived. In the next financial year, the Council was aiming to get an exemption for Brent foster carers in the same way, as either a full exemption or a discount. This was within the Council's gift to offer and was not something independent agencies could offer so it acted as a good incentive to foster with Brent.

The Committee asked for clarification on the LAC resilience service outlined in the report and why it was spoken about in the context of hospital discharge. Kelli Eboji explained that it was compared to the hospital discharge process in the report because the service used the same positive behaviour therapeutic approach. The discharge service offered therapeutic wraparound support for young people who had been discharged from hospital, whereas the resilience service was focused on LAC and foster carers where they struggled to maintain a placement and had experienced multiple breakdowns. As such, the resilience service was aimed at both the LAC and foster carer.

The Committee highlighted feedback they had heard from foster carers that the package they received was not well communicated before they become a foster carer. They asked if anything was being done to improve that communication to ensure the package was clear beforehand. Officers confirmed that the service was working with the Council's Communications Department on this currently in the same way that it had communicated the local offer to care leavers.

The Committee commended the offer of a blue light card for fostering households.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note and advocate for the need for Brent to improve its offer to foster carers in order to increase the number of in house foster carers and improve retention rates.
- ii) To note the benefits of ongoing work to establish a regional West London Fostering Hub.

10. **Progress Report - Brent Residential Children's Home**

The Chair introduced the report which provided an update on the progress to establish a residential children's care home in Brent. She highlighted that a Cabinet decision to purchase a property for the use of establishing the care home was currently subject to a valid call-in which was due to be discussed by the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee on Monday 12 February 2024. Until that Committee had met, the decision to purchase a property in Wembley for the purpose of the care home could not be implemented. The report detailed further updates on the progress of the children's residential care home project.

Michelle Gwyther (Head of Forward Planning Performance and Partnerships, Brent Council) added that feedback from children and young people was integral in designing the operation of the home. There were a number of activities designed with care experienced young people to gather their feedback, including an exciting drawing competition where young people could design one of the bedrooms of the care home.

In considering the reports, the following points were raised:

Assuming the project was able to progress, the Committee felt that a residential children's care home in Brent would be hugely beneficial to children and young people in the borough, and the project had been well planned to offer significant savings to the Council.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the contents of the report.

11. **Health Annual Report for Looked After Children 2022-2023**

Esther Power (Designated Nurse – Children in Care - Brent & Hounslow – NHS NWL) and Kate Head (Designated doctor for Children Looked After - Harrow, Hillingdon and Brent – NHS NWL) provided a presentation on the health needs of Looked After Children (LAC) across NWL. The following key points were highlighted:

- There had been a close focus on inequalities for children and young people over the past 2 years, and the health service had signed up to the Care Leaver's Covenant, which looked to reduce barriers for LAC and care leavers into getting employment and training in the NHS.
- In terms of health inequalities, it was highlighted that LAC were 4 times more likely to have a mental health need, behavioural and emotional difficulties, substance misuse, or experience teenage pregnancy.
- It was highlighted that many children became looked after as a result of abuse and neglect and as such, although they had many of the same health issues as their peers, the extent of those health issues was often greater because of their past experiences.
- There were 348 LAC in Brent which was higher than other NWL boroughs had who provided that data.
- In terms of the health needs identified during initial and review health assessments, the top themes were around CAMHS, dentistry and immunisations. There was a large range of health issues reported at 431 health needs across 127 individual health assessments, meaning many had more than one identified health need.
- 77% of children and young people reported an emotional health need, and some children may have reported an emotional health need but were not necessarily accessing CAMHS or counselling.
- 38% of children and young people over 10 years old reported sleep issues, which was high.
- In relation to growth and development, the percentage of children and young people with incomplete immunisations was 33.85%. As immunisations were a premise for good health all children would be expected to have complete immunisations. This data may have been skewed by the high number Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) in the borough, as often they attended health reviews with incomplete health records.
- In terms of UASC health specifically, some health needs identified were around sleep, dentistry, counselling, and infectious disease screening. 50 UASCs reported a mental health need, 22 reported gastro issues and 31 reported skin infections. It was highlighted that, compared to the data from the rest of the population, there were some outliers in health needs identified for UASC relating to their unique experiences. UASC also had lower incidences of therapeutic input relative to reported emotional health and wellbeing needs.
- Suggested interventions to tackle health inequalities, high rates of incomplete immunisations and high rates of dental issues were being discussed by the

Integrated Care Board (ICB). It was highlighted that if significant health needs were being identified, then there was a need to work jointly as corporate parents to ensure young people had access to services. As an ongoing piece of work the health service was looking to review the health needs of the LAC and care leaver population, and some areas of NWL had appointed a Transition Care Leaver Nurse to work with young people over 16 years old.

The Chair thanked colleagues for the presentation and invited comments and questions from those present, with the following raised:

The Committee asked about the additional support on offer for LAC and care leavers experiencing mental health issues or emotional wellbeing issues. They were advised that the health service had seen an increased number of young people attending A & E departments in distress, and so CAMHS were looking at where the most suitable placements were for young people to be discharged and what support could be put in place. There was now a Children and Young People Mental Health Working Group scoping all services across the ICB and how they could be improved, informed by engagement with children and young people.

The Committee asked for further information about the Specialist Services for UASC. They were advised that the Unity Clinic covered health assessments, emotional wellbeing screenings, and infectious disease screenings in one appointment. The health service wanted the infectious disease screening to be more joined up across NWL as some areas of NWL required multiple referrals which held up the process. It was highlighted that in Brent this was quite well-managed compared to other boroughs, so the ICB was looking to make this more equitable for all UASC across NWL. The Council was currently in discussions with the health service to consider the joint commissioning of a service for UASC emotional wellbeing.

The Committee asked what the difficulties were in maintaining frequency of health assessments and supporting the health needs of LAC. They heard that the reason it was difficult to manage was due to the frequency of LAC moving around and language barriers. Due to the need to use independent fostering agencies and make placements out of borough, many LAC were not placed in the local area and it was difficult from a health perspective to have oversight of that and be aware of health services in other areas. Getting to know young people was very important in ensuring there was consistency in health, so building relationships where UASC felt they could trust healthcare professionals was important and key in identifying exploitation. Esther Power was involved in Strategy discussions all the way through to health assessments ensuring that trust and consistency of professional. Another aspect of supporting LAC and care leavers with their health needs was around empowering young people to manage their own health and supporting young people to advocate for themselves. The service was also looking to attend as many forums as possible to hear directly from young people what they needed from their health services and what was affecting them.

The Chair felt there had been some interesting ideas raised to pilot future programmes and was pleased to have colleagues from health attending the Committee on an annual basis. The Committee hoped to integrate health more into the Committee in future to have more of a collaborative approach going forward.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the contents of the presentation.


12. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 6:45pm

COUNCILLOR GWEN GRAHL
Chair

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 Brent	Corporate Parenting Committee 22 April 2024
	Report from the Corporate Director of Children and Young People
	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools - Cllr Gwen Grahl
Brent Virtual School for Looked After Children Annual Report September 2022 – August 2023	

Wards Affected:	ALL
Key or Non-Key Decision:	N/A
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: <small>(If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)</small>	Open
List of Appendices:	N/A
Background Papers:	N/A
Contact Officer(s): <small>(Name, Title, Contact Details)</small>	Michaela Richards Acting Head Teacher – Brent Virtual School Michaela.Richards@brent.gov.uk

1. Purpose of the Annual Report

1.1 The purpose of the annual report is to outline the activity and impact of the Brent Virtual School (BVS) during the academic year 2022-2023 in monitoring and supporting looked after children to achieve the best possible educational outcomes. Data contained in this report is for looked after children who were in the care of Brent Council for the academic year 2022-2023, and the report includes outcomes for all children who have been in care for a year or more as of 31 March 2023 (“the eligible cohort”).¹

1.2 Contribution to Borough Plan Priorities & Strategic Context

This report sets out the work of the virtual school, the achievement of Brent’s looked after children and the developments that have taken place in the reporting period. The work of the virtual school contributes to the following borough priorities:

- **The Best Start in Life**
- **Prosperity and Stability**
- **A Healthier Brent**
- **Thriving Communities**

¹ 1.1 The DfE sets the eligible cohort for reporting on external examinations as at least 13 months before the day of the first exam. This is acknowledgement of services requiring time to be able to support and affect positive changes.

2.0 Context

2.1 At the end of the academic year in July 2023, 345 children and young people were on roll with the BVS. 24 were under four-year-olds, 195 pupils were aged 4-16 years old and 126 were 16–18-year-olds. Throughout the course of the academic year this number will have fluctuated by as much as 10% in either direction due to the nature of the cohort.

2.2 The BVS operates as a multi-disciplinary team supporting young people in care to achieve the very best they can. The team comprises of advisory staff (both teaching and non-teaching), an educational psychologist, education officers, a Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) and year 11 education officer, a post-16 advisor, an enrichment coordinator and a performance officer. The team draws on the expertise of colleagues across the Inclusion Service as well as the additional services contracted by the local authority, such as Prospects (careers advice) and Wellbeing and Emotional Support Team (WEST). The team works closely with social workers and foster carers, as well as school and setting staff.

2.3 The priorities for BVS in 2022/23 were:

- a) To provide online surgeries for designated teachers on improving the quality of Personal Education Plans (PEPs) and the use of the pupil premium to raise aspirations, targeting schools and settings where the need for additional support has been identified (Section 8).
- b) To continue to provide an enrichment curriculum both online and onsite, drawing in expertise as required and rooting this into the interests of looked after children (sections 11 and 12)
- c) To increase direct work by the advisory teachers and life coaches in school and colleges where young people are experiencing challenges to remain positively engaged (sections 3, 5 and 10)
- d) To establish a set of measures to evaluate the impact of the BVS Extended Duties Team (ExDT). (Section 13)
- e) To review the multidisciplinary support that aims to ensure effective earlier identification of SEND needs in tandem with the new guidance for Virtual Schools in supporting the educational outcomes for all children with a social worker (sections 6 and 13).

2.4 The BVS was successful in delivering against the five priorities during the academic year 2022/23, the details of which are contained in the relevant sections of the main body of the report.

3.0 Attendance

3.1 At the end of 2022/23 academic year the school attendance for Looked After Children in KS1 and KS2 (Primary) was 95% compared to 93.68% in 2021/22. School attendance at KS3 and KS4 (Secondary) was 84%, compared to 82.42% in 2021/22. LAC Attendance for the last academic year has increased in line with pre-pandemic figures and are, along with the general population figures, some of the highest figures nationally.

3.2 To maintain and increase attendance, the following actions are taken:

- Monitoring attendance via an online attendance collection platform

- Making attendance a priority target on all PEPs where attendance is identified as a cause for concern.
 - Regular meetings with LAC and Permanency Service managers to discuss attendance and support where needed.
 - Fortnightly attendance meetings where below 95% attendance is flagged and discussed as well as serious concerns of below 90%.
 - Early intervention where attendance is between 95% and 90% is highlighted as a concern.
 - Working collaboratively with Education Welfare Service (EWS) to monitor attendance.
- 3.3** At any one time, there will be small number of looked after children or young people who are awaiting a mainstream school place, a special school place or an appropriate alternative provision. This will be for several reasons: for example, children may have newly arrived from abroad as an unaccompanied minor (UASC) for whom an age assessment is required; or children may be placed into care as an emergency; or they have had a change of care placement at short notice. In a small number of cases, school placements break down and the child or young person may not yet have been allocated a new school place. Throughout the academic year 2022/23 this number fluctuated between 8 at the highest point down to 0.
- 3.4** To ensure that children who are between school placements do not miss education, the BVS arranges 1:1 tuition for the core subjects of English and maths, which is funded by the Pupil Premium Grant. This usually takes place in the home setting, although older pupils may be taught in their local library. For some LAC, particularly those who have missed periods of schooling prior to care, mentoring is commissioned to prepare and support them back into education.
- 3.5** Children not on a school roll are monitored at fortnightly meetings, which ensure these pupils are receiving suitable education in the interim period and that timely action is being taken to secure a school place. The majority of Brent LAC are placed into an appropriate education setting within the statutory timescale (20 days). For children where there is challenging placement stability or vulnerability issues, the BVS leadership team meets with LACP leadership team to ensure a holistic approach is taken to enable the child to access education.

4.0 Exclusions

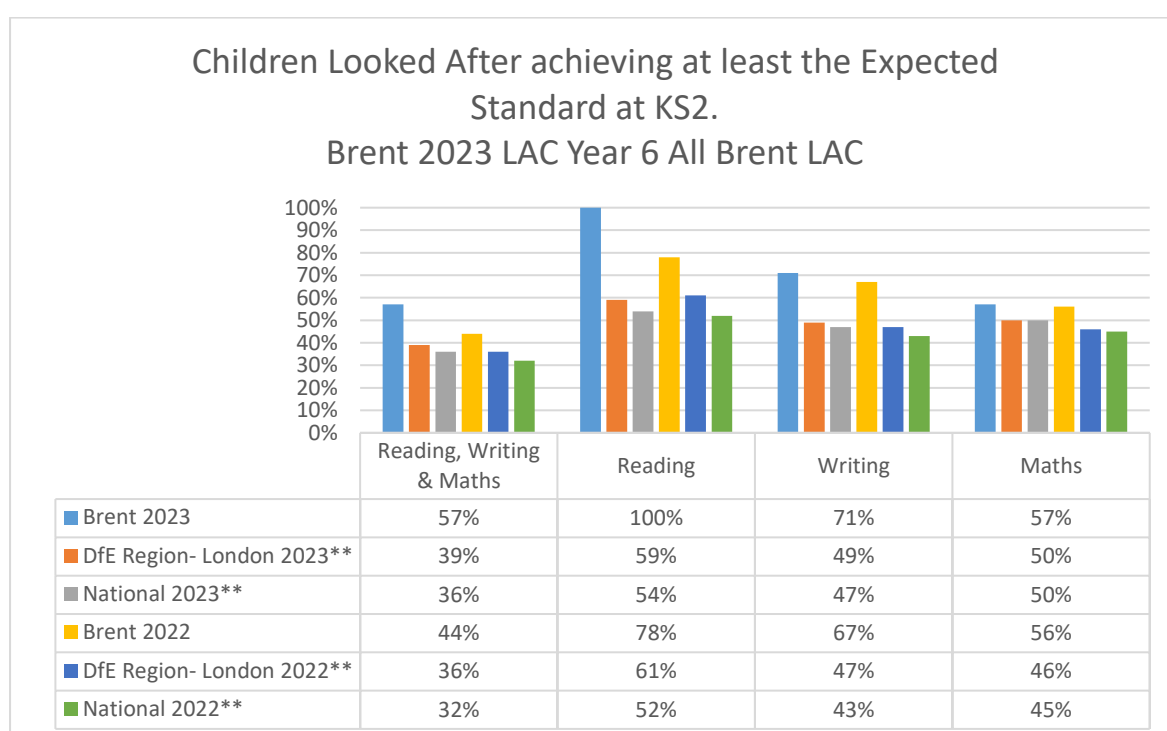
- 4.1** There was an increase in fixed term exclusions during the academic year 2022/23 in comparison with the situation in the previous two academic years (27 compared to 21 in 2021/22 and 16 in 2020/21), which compares to before the pandemic (26 in 2018/19). The BVS has actively engaged with schools where a young person's behaviour has been identified as a barrier to achievement. Additionally, the BVS has arranged respite provision, extra support in the classroom or outside of school and for those pupils on a pathway to a permanent exclusion a managed move has been arranged. As with previous years there have not been any permanent exclusions for looked after children. This is due to the close partnership working with schools, designated teachers, foster carers and social workers, addressing problems before they arise with the oversight of the BVS leadership team.

5.0 Progress and Attainment

5.1 Key Stage 2: The academic year 22/23 was the second year of testing since the pandemic and the results for the whole cohort are positive for all measures, showing an increase from last year's results. In 2022/23 Brent LAC outperformed LAC regionally and nationally for the same measures (Table 1). It should, however, be noted that the number of children in the cohort is relatively small, which means that one or two children can have a significant impact either way on results.

5.2 At the time of the 2023 KS2 tests, Brent had 10 LAC in Year 6, of whom there are results for seven children. Two of the three children for whom there are no results did not sit KS2 tests due to their level of SEND (both have an Education, Health, and Care Plan). Table 2 below captures the outcomes for the seven children.

Table 1: **2023 KS2 All CLA in KS2 cohort**



5.3 Of the whole cohort of 10 children, seven had been in care for at least a year on 31 March 2023 (the 'eligible cohort'). Considering the two children with an ECHP who were not tested, Table 2 presents the results for five children who had been in care for at least a year. There was a significant increase in the reading results for this cohort compared to Brent LAC in 2021/22 and against the local and national measures. In comparison, there was a significant decrease in the maths results from the previous year and also against current and previous regional and national data for LAC. The results for writing are fairly comparable with all measures. Whilst it is pleasing to see the increase in the reading results, which demonstrate that BVS literacy interventions have had impact, it highlights that there is a need for further maths support and therefore will be a focus for the next academic year.

Table 2: 2023 KS2 CLA in care at least one year at 31/03/2023



5.4 BVS has always supported tuition as a time limited intervention for students who require this, in addition to booster programmes for year groups sitting external exams (Year 6 and Year 11) have been organised for the February half term and the Easter holidays. Following the pandemic additional catch-up funding was received from the DfE and this was used to further expand the offer. To support achievement in numeracy and literacy, during 2022/23, as with previous academic years, the BVS subscribed to the Letterbox Club – a subscription that delivers books and educational games to children aged 5 to 12 monthly. Subscription to Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library that offers a similar programme to Letterbox covers babies to 4 years old. Online book club led by the primary advisory teacher, Promoting the Achievement of Looked after Children (PALAC), MathsWhizz (software subscription), and individual tuition or group intervention. In total 43 Children engaged in either booster or PALAC sessions, whilst a further 31 had access to MathsWhizz and/or Literacy subscriptions during the academic year. The results indicate that the focus on literacy has been effective. As with the enrichment programmes a statistical correlation is not readily available for these activities. However, all are valuable resources in supporting children’s development as recognised through the PEP process and feedback from carers and young people.

KS2 Case Study BH

BH is a Year 7 Pupil. There were concerns raised in Year 6 when his attendance dipped under 80%, so targets aimed at improving his attendance were agreed at his Spring PEP. An analysis of his attendance patterns revealed a reluctance to come to school, always on a Monday.

BVS worked with his primary school and enlisted the help of a mentor. The school allocated him a learning mentor at the same time and this had a positive impact on BH's attitude during the early part of the Summer Term. This was, however, short-lived as a familial bereavement and a change of teacher impacted negatively on him and he stopped coming into school.

A robust transition plan was devised by the BVS in consultation with social care, the school and, crucially, BH, with a focus on improving his attendance incrementally. This including him spending time at his allocated secondary school, agreement for Daily Check-ins with a senior member of staff, engaging him in photography and linking his access to this to his attendance, transition work with his learning mentor and BH meeting with an EP to devise a plan that gave him a sense of control.

At the end of the summer term his attendance, despite rising was still only 87.04%. BH moved to his secondary school in September. He initially struggled to attend school but his secondary school would collect him from home and take him to school and on the days where he was refusing to attend they sent a teacher to his home to educate him off-site to avoid gaps in his learning. In addition, his learning mentor worked on developing a learning mind-set with the BVS chairing monthly attendance review meetings. At the end of his first year in his secondary school he finished the school year with his attendance at 95.43%.

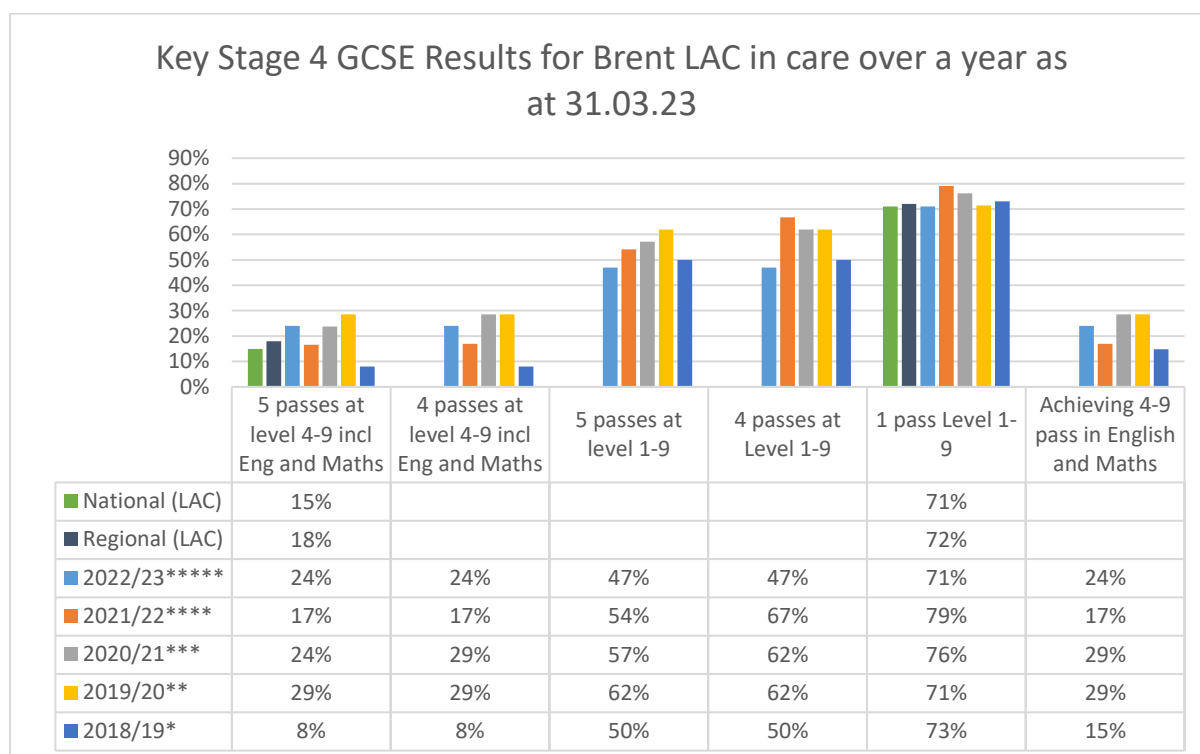
5.5 Key Stage 4: At the end of the academic year 2022/23 there were 38 Year 11 students of whom 8 were UASC. It is worth noting that there has been a significant decrease in this cohort from the previous year reflecting a trend over the past 4 years (60 Year 11 students of whom 23 were UASC in 2021/22). The Statistical First Release (SFR eligible cohort) was 30 of whom 13 were either UASC who did not sit external examinations or children with an EHCP and significant needs which meant that they did not sit exams. 17 students sat exams and counted in the SFR results.

5.6 To support both the primary and secondary cohorts, Pupil Premium funding was utilised in several ways. Primarily funding was sent to all schools to ensure that PEP targets were achieved. The funding that was retained by the virtual school supported the enrichment programme and several 'Aim higher' activities, such as university visits, residentials and trips to key government offices (Parliament and 10 Downing Street). A number of children accessed mentoring and/or tuition at pertinent times of the year. As well as some of the more generic interventions, the virtual school also funded bespoke interventions, where there was evidence that these could support improved outcomes and individual aspirations, such as subscriptions to National Geographic for a child who expressed an interest in the natural world and geography, music software for a young person who was identified as a talented musician and cricket whites and club membership for a talented cricketer.

5.7 The number of LAC achieving the headline figures of 5 passes at level 4-9 including English and maths has remained the same as in the previous academic year. Over the past 5 years there has been a positive increase in this measure from the 7% pass rate in 2018/19. In 2019/20 when results were based on teacher assessments there was a considerable spike to 28% but it is encouraging to see in the years following the pandemic and with the return to public examinations that the results have continued to hover in the 20% region. This is a marked improvement on the pre-pandemic period. Brent continues to compare favourably to LAC national and regional figures for the headline measure of 5 passes at level 4-9 including English and maths.

5.8 24% of the 'eligible cohort' achieved 5 passes at level 4-9 including English and maths in comparison to 17% in 2021/22. As with the whole cohort there has been a positive increase in this measure over the past 5 years. BVS continues to work with Pan London colleagues and research partners to understand the best ways to support Brent LAC to reach this measure, as it influences their further education opportunities and outcomes as adults.

Table 3: Achievement rates for GCSEs 2018/19-2022/23



*The above data is for the whole LAC cohort minus SEN/disabilities and ESOL (24 LAC) total cohort-53

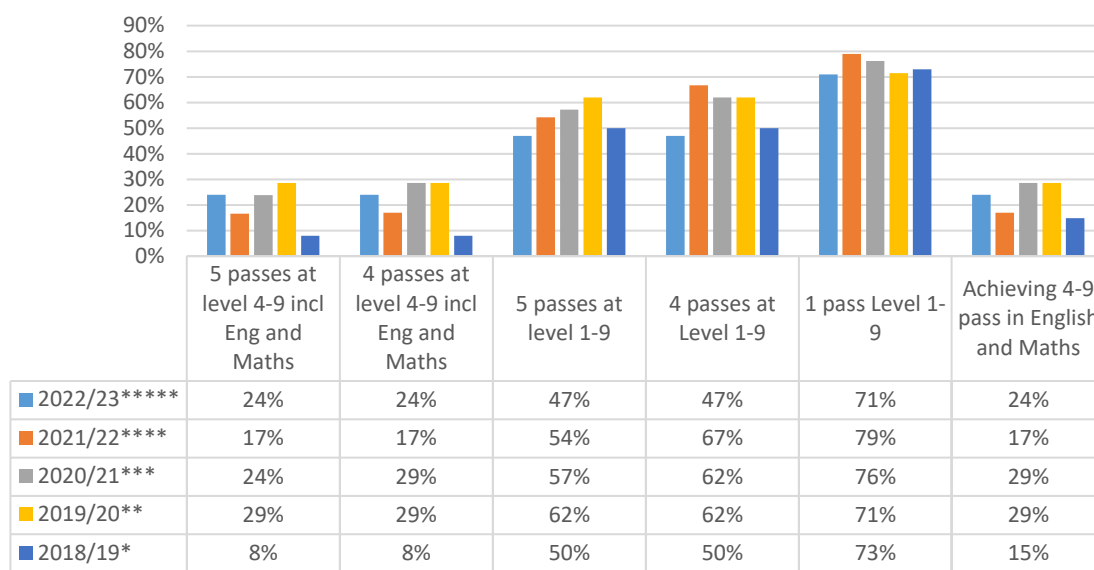
**The above data is for the whole LAC cohort minus SEN/disabilities and ESOL (7 LAC) total cohort-36

***The above data is for the whole LAC cohort minus SEN/disabilities and ESOL (9 LAC) total cohort-43

****The above data is for the whole LAC cohort minus SEN/disabilities and ESOL (22 LAC) total cohort-57

*****The above data is for the whole LAC cohort minus SEN/disabilities and ESOL (10 LAC) total cohort- 35

Key Stage 4 GCSE Results for Brent LAC in care over a year as at 31.03.23



*The above data is for the eligible LAC cohort minus SEN and ESOL (13 LAC)

**The above data is for the eligible LAC cohort minus SEN and ESOL (2 LAC)

***The above data is for the eligible LAC cohort minus SEN and ESOL (3 LAC)

****The above data is for the eligible LAC cohort minus SEN and ESOL (10 LAC)

*****The above data is for the eligible LAC cohort minus SEN and ESOL (5 LAC)

5.9 Of the five pupils who had been in care for at least a year and made expected progress at KS4, achieving 5 passes at level 4-9 including English and Maths, three had been in long term care ranging from 6 -13 years and all three were in care at the end of KS2. Two achieved expected standards in Reading, Writing and Maths and one pupil achieved the expected measure in reading and writing but slightly missed the expected measure in Maths. This narrative almost mirrors the narrative in 2021/22 and clearly shows the correlation between long term care, positive key stage two results, and outcomes at the end of Key Stage 4. Again, as with last year's report all five pupils were in stable and supportive foster care placements for five years or longer. This clearly show the correlation between placement stability: "stable homes, built on love" and positive education outcomes.

5.10 All five pupils who achieved expected outcomes at Level 4-9 passes including English and maths had 1:1 tutoring in the core subject/s either delivered in school, externally through the Lumina programme in partnership with Harrow School or sourced using pupil premium funding. Whilst one pupil had an EHCP, the other four had no SEN needs and maintained positive attendance throughout Key Stage 4. Three of the five were regular attendees on the BVS enrichment programme. Feedback from one carer on results day validated the approach:

"All the extra-curricular activities that you have provided for her definitely made the difference."

5.11 There were six students who did not achieve any GCSE passes who were eligible for entry. One of the prevailing and common themes for these students were contextual

safeguarding concerns and missing episodes which understandably impacted on the consistency of their education. For some of these students there were also mental health needs that impacted on school attendance and subsequently exam entry. All six students received additional support throughout Year 11 to help them to reengage in education and support their needs, but this did not lead to successful outcomes. In contrast with the students who did achieve at GCSE, all six students had been in care for 3 years or less ranging from 3 months (at the time of first exams) to 3 years. All six students were either placed in semi-independent provisions or residential homes and only two achieved the expected levels at Key Stage 2 in reading and writing only. Placement type does not necessarily correlate with poorer outcomes, however the length of time in care does as it means a shorter period of stability prior to exams.

Key Stage 4 Case Study DT

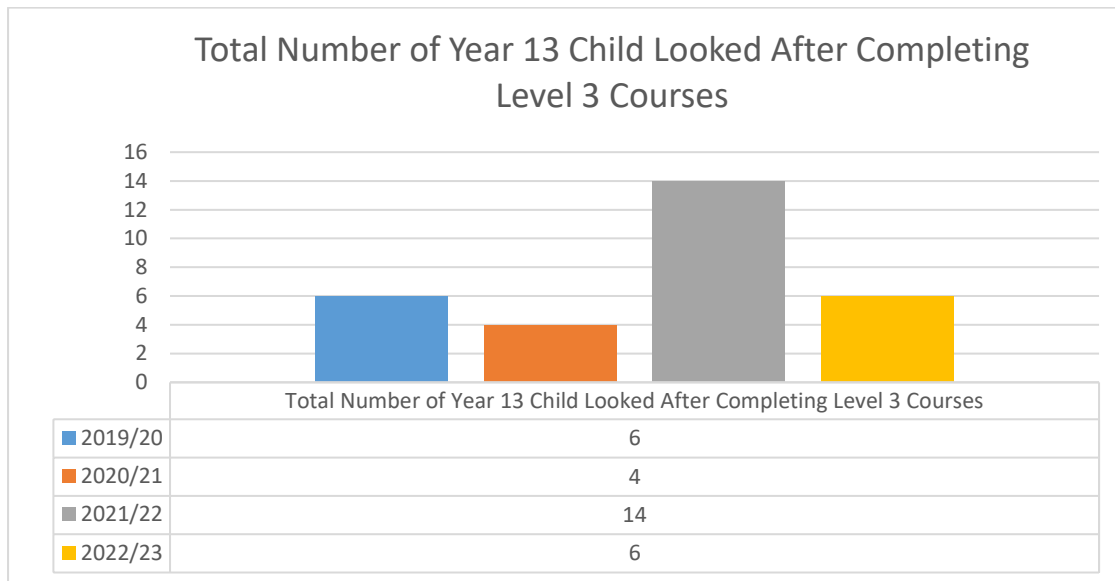
DT is one of a set of twins. He came into care because of significant neglect and physical abuse. At the time he came into care he had an EHCP for Social Emotional and Behaviour Difficulties (SEBD). Shortly after coming into care his primary school placed him on a 45-day exclusion as an alternative to permanently excluding him. It was agreed locally to move him and siblings to their paternal grandparents who lived outside London. DT found it difficult to settle into his new school, but they offered outstanding pastoral support. They quickly identified that he would need support to better access the curriculum in place. Despite this support his KS2 results were below the expected standards. He successfully transitioned to Secondary School and did well but after being there for almost three years, amid allegations of bullying, he was moved to another school near his home. The School and Virtual School put in place an extensive support package which met his academic and emotional well-being needs. At the end of KS4 he exceeded his expectations by gaining Grade 4s in both English and Maths as well as BTECs in Sport and Business and Enterprise.

- 5.12** Identifying these trends are key to the early intervention programme that BVS puts in place for young people. BVS also recognises that for some young people, particularly those new to care, it may not be appropriate for some interventions to take place immediately. Some young people are not of statutory school age when they are ready to engage which is why post-16 funding has been championed by virtual schools for several years. With the trial funding that was agreed in 2022/23, BVS are hopeful that for some young people who were unable to engage positively in education at Key Stage 4, with further support they will achieve positive outcomes in in Key Stage 5.
- 5.13 Post-16:** The number of post-16 young people that were in education, employment, or training (EET) at the end of the academic year 2022/23 is in line with the same reporting period last year (80%). There were regular meetings between the BVS Post-16 Advisor, the Performance Data Officer, and Prospects advisors to review the position of all students and to ensure those young people who were NEET were receiving direct and targeted support. During the academic year 2022/23 a bespoke programme focused on the harder to reach NEET cohort was developed with the view to support these young people into EET engagement. Whilst the early stages of the programme appeared positive the engagement was not at the anticipated level. Through our self-evaluation processes one of the key areas identified as a reason for non-engagement was the lack

of collaboration with young people in the development of the programme. This is a target for the academic year 2023/24 and the plan is to relaunch the programme in the summer term.

5.14 There were 6 Year 13 students who completed Level 3 courses, which is a decrease on the previous academic year. It is of note though that the cohort size also decreased from 93 to 70. Despite this the number is still higher than pre pandemic numbers. Of the six, one is currently at university whilst four are in employment.

Table 4 Total Number of Year 13 Child Looked After Completing Level 3 Courses



Post-16 Case Study AA

AA came into care following a breakdown in an adoptive placement, when he was 6 years of age, after his adoptive mother felt she could no longer cope with his behaviour. He was diagnosed with ADHD and prescribed medication to help him manage his emotions and behaviour better, whilst at his mainstream primary school, he was issued an EHCP with a recommendation that he attend a special school.

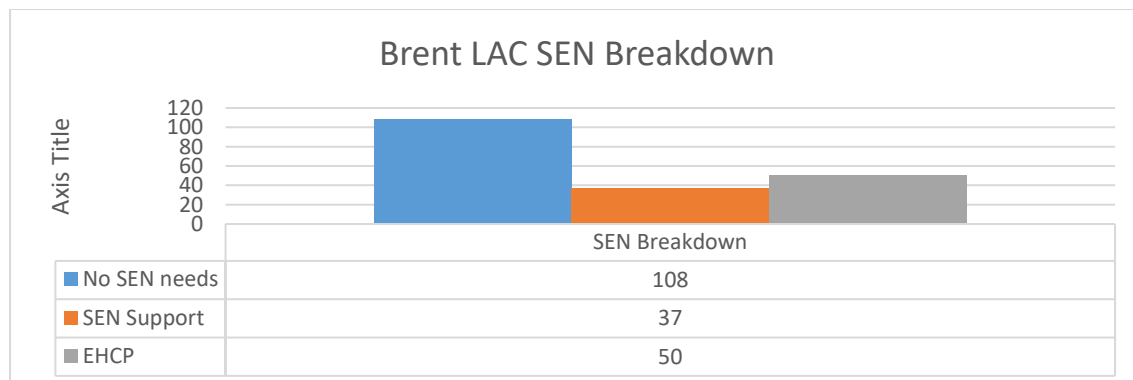
He started at a specialist SEMH School in Hillingdon. Over the next three and a half years he had six placement breakdowns and moves causing him to be moved to new placements and new schools in various parts of the England. In Year 9 he was placed in a residential placement and started to attend their linked SEMH School. He was settled in this placement until this long-term residential placement broke down due to him not being safe as he went missing and exploited substances resulting in emergency hospital admission. He was moved to to another city due to risk of associations and to prevent him from getting involved in county lines/ gangs. Despite this his absconding escalated and he was not attending school. He was eventually found after a lengthy period and was then moved to another location.

Initially there were concerns that he might abscond again from his new placement, but a support plan devised in conjunction with social care, the placement and virtual school provided him with a significant support plan, including close monitoring by placement staff, mentoring, tutoring, whilst we sought him a school place, and frequent contact with his S/W. Although there were a few significant negative incidents at the start, he began to positively engage. In late 2020, he was allocated a school place at a small but supportive SEMH school.

He continued to have regular conversations with his former P/A whom he learned to trust and is now confident enough to ring his former Advisory Teacher in the Virtual School if he wants to discuss his education. He can reflect on some of his previous behaviours and has made a real effort to engage with the professionals supporting him. He has now left care and is currently attending University in the Midlands, where he is making good progress on his course.

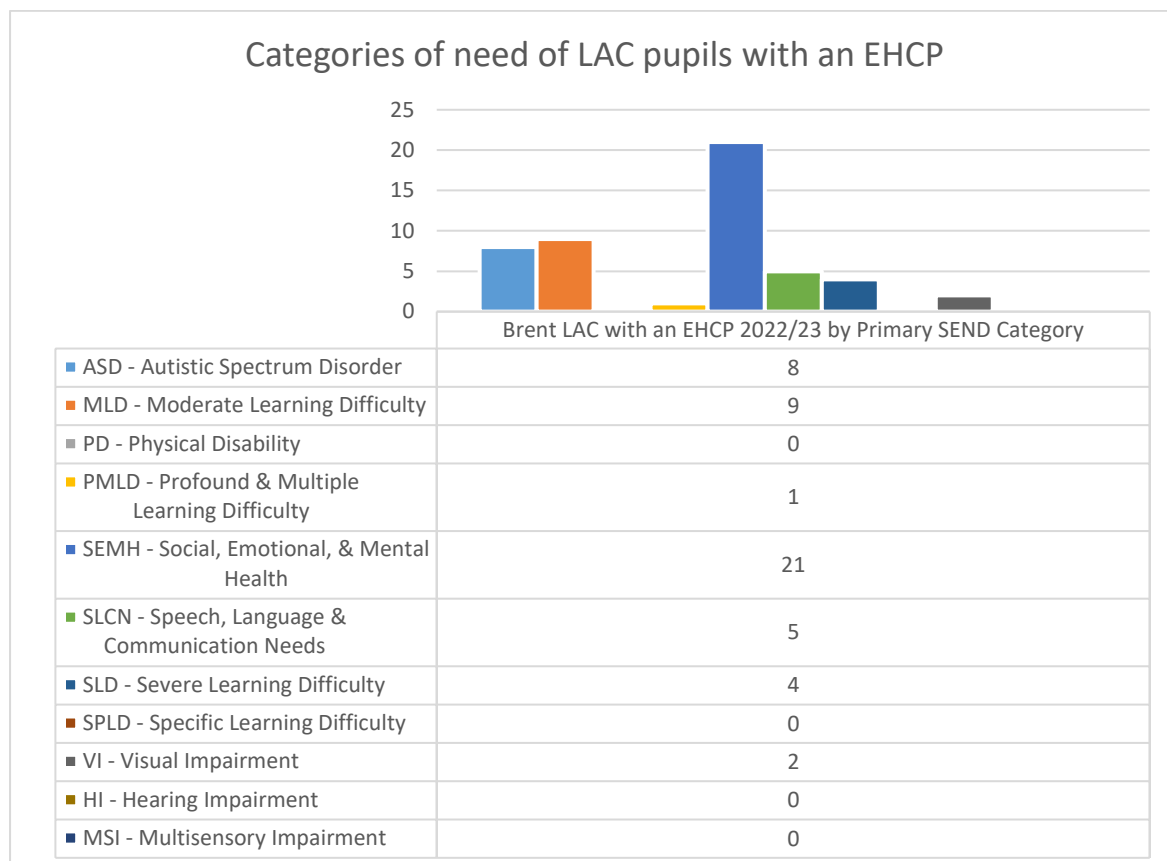
6.0 SEND

- 6.1 The number of statutory aged young people in care under the BVS with an EHCP is 50 26% of the cohort in comparison to the general population which is 3.5%. 6 of this group were in residential settings and 25 were placed in SEN special schools and 28 of 31 were educated outside of the borough.



6.2 Table 4 outlines the categories of need of LAC pupils with an EHCP. The highest area of need in the LAC cohort is social, emotional and mental health (SEMH). These figures reflect the vulnerability of young people becoming LAC, and the complex trauma and challenging environments many experienced prior to becoming LAC.

Table 4 Categories of need of LAC pupils with an EHCP



7.0 Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)

7.1 9 new statutory aged UASC entered the care system in the academic year 2022/23, compared to 18 in 2021/22. All but one of these young people were in Key Stage 4. At Key Stage 5, 12 UASC entered the care system during 2022/23 compared to 36 the previous academic year. There is a robust programme in place for new arrivals that includes tuition, enrichment and signposting to local community groups and activities.

7.2 Most UASC are disapplied from KS4 assessments as new arrivals into the country. The majority are placed into local ESOL provision in a school or college setting. Many progress onto further education and for some higher education. Given that most UASC enter the care system in Key Stage 4 or 5 it is imperative that post 16 funding is in place to support their education and aspirations.

UASC/Care leaver Case Study TDP

TDP arrived in England from Vietnam. When he arrived in the UK he could not speak English but was a highly motivated learner. Through his interpreter he said he wanted to be a computer engineer when he left school. The VS funded a place at an ESOL summer school, where he could start to acquire English. He was placed in a school, local to his placement and accessed their ESOL provision. He continued to be supported with tuition provided, a laptop purchased and access to VS led events so he could practise his conversational English.

TDP became increasingly apparent he was a gifted mathematician and excelled in computing. Whilst his progress in these subjects was outstanding, he continued to struggle with his English. When he did his GCSEs in 2018 he achieved 'A*' in Further Maths, 'A' in computing but E in English and D in English Literature. He has been supported to improve his English. His progress led to him being referred to a specialist Computer Engineering access course which when completed will grant him access to a computer engineering degree course.

8.0 ePEP

8.1 The percentage of PEPs completed over the academic year remained within the 92-95% range. As the eGov PEP system has been operational for two academic years, there has been an improvement in the consistency of PEP completion and also the overall standard. The autumn term Designated Teacher forum was focused on PEP quality and pupil premium targets, which set the tone for the academic year. Monthly PEP training is ongoing for new social workers and where necessary individual training was also offered.

8.2 The quality of PEPs is reviewed each term and the foci changes dependent on current workstreams with at least one audit focused on LAC with EHCPs or SEN Support. The 2023 Ofsted report stated the following:

"Personal education plans provide children with realistic and achievable targets and goals. Staff in the virtual school know their children in care very well and encourage them to learn and to have aspirations for their futures."

During the summer term, 80% of PEPs were judged to be good or outstanding. BVS is continually working with schools whose PEPs fall below the required standard and the training offer is designed to support this further.

9.0 Mental Health and Wellbeing

9.1 The mental health and wellbeing of Looked after Children is supported by the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) and the Wellbeing and Emotional Support Team (WEST), a commissioned service delivered by the Anna Freud Centre.

9.2 During the academic year 2022/23 WEST worked with 77 LAC. In terms of ethnicity, the highest proportion were White (25%) or Black/Black British (25%), and the most frequently referred age was 14-16. There were 38 females (50%) and 36 males (48%).

During this academic year, 249 sessions were delivered - 176 direct sessions and 73 indirect sessions were delivered. 92 sessions were delivered face to face. The rate of non-attendance to sessions was 11% (28 sessions).

9.3 Alongside direct interventions with LAC and young people, WEST provide consultations and indirect intervention programmes supporting social workers, foster carers and other members of the CYP's professional network to best support the LAC. Social care staff working with Looked After children can sign up to the weekly consultation session.

9.4 Reflective Fostering Programme (RFP) Foster Carers and Kin Carers (on-line): In addition to referrals for individual work, WEST has delivered three session group programmes. Evidence promotes relational interventions with carers of LAC to strengthen attachments, improve placement stability and reduce the number of additional professionals in their lives. In total 12 Brent carers have completed the programme. 100% of foster carers reported feeling better equipped to manage the challenges ahead following the group and that the context of the group made sense to them:

"I used to jump into interactions when [CYP] walked through the door, now I pause and think about where I am. I have reflected on past incidents and what I could have done differently".

"I was initially disappointed that an intervention was offered to me and not [child] but not a day goes by without me using the strategies for reflecting that I learnt on the program. It is a life skill. It has affected all parts of my life and other relationships. I am in a better place because of it".

"I really looked forward to the sessions every week. It makes me feel like others go through it too!" "I learned more from hearing about other people's perspectives."

9.5 Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)

During the year as agreed with Virtual School team, WEST provided a series of workshops to support the UASC population. One workshop took place directly with young people, one took place with school staff who support these young people and the other was attendance at a college support fair to increase visibility within the college environment.

The face-to-face session introduced information around general wellbeing support, and strategies for identified and specific wellbeing difficulties - for example sleep hygiene and managing emotions related to past experiences of trauma. The population of the group was co-created through consultation with social workers and school staff.

The workshop with staff who support the young people included opportunities for discussion, reflection, and professional development. The staff who attended were introduced to materials explaining trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, and strategies to support young people presenting with this at school. The session also provided a space for reflection on staff's own wellbeing when supporting young people with these experiences. The workshop promoted this self-reflection, and self-care and gave space to develop ideas around supporting this within the working day. Feedback from young people was positive:

"Enjoyed it"

"Found it very helpful"

"Felt listened to".

A school staff member feedback: "Really helpful to have a reminder of trauma and PTSD as sometimes it can be difficult to remember in the moment of managing difficult behaviour."

10.0 Pupil Premium Spend

10.1 BVS retains 50% of the Pupil Premium Plus (PPP) which is used to fund several resources and activities including mentoring, residential trips, enrichment activities; online and face-to-face training and 1:1 tuition for students out of school. The remaining 50% is allocated to schools to support the progress of children and young people looked after by Brent, the use of which is monitored through the PEP process. The enrichment programme offers LAC a wide range of opportunities both local and further afield and the Virtual School is constantly looking at ways to improve the offer.

10.2 Some of the retained PPP is used for BVS staff to provide a comprehensive training programme to a range of professionals working with vulnerable students. The content of these sessions includes:

- Governors' Training for Brent schools, promoting positive outcomes for disadvantaged groups and the effective use of pupil premium.
- Understanding trauma (Multi agency training for social workers and designated teachers).
- Reflective Fostering programme (two separate programmes for foster carers and kinship carers delivered by WEST).
- Education Online Training Programme for foster carers.
- Pornography and Youth Produced Sexual Imagery (Sexting) - delivered by Brook.
- Sexual Harassment and responding to incidents – delivered by Brook.
- Designated Teacher Forum (autumn term - PEPs and PPG/summer term - understanding and identifying EBSA).
- EPEP training for new social workers.

11.0 Enrichment Programme

11.1 The BVS enrichment programme is a valued part of the offer to young people and has grown tremendously over the past four years. The relationship with John Lyons Foundation and the Harrow, Ealing, Barnet, and Brent Virtual Schools has meant that Brent LAC have been engaged in a wide range of activities but also have had the opportunities to form friendships with other LAC in neighbouring boroughs. Additionally, over the year LAC are able to develop their confidence, networks and interests through their engagement with the programme. Over the past academic year, 98 LAC attended the following programmes:

- Springboard Youth Academy Summer Camp
- Harrow School Lumina Tuition
- Strength in Horses
- Go Ape
- Science Museum
- Thorpe Park
- Kidzania
- Arvon Residential
- Reading Clubs
- British Library

- Kew Gardens
- Brunel Urban Scholars
- Care to dance
- Jamie's Farm



(Science Museum Trip, August 2023)



(Go Ape, July 2023)

12.0 Celebration of Achievement

12.1 An integral part of the virtual school's annual calendar is the Celebration of Achievement evening, which is an opportunity to applaud Brent LAC for their achievements throughout the past academic year. It is also a time to reflect, set aspirations and celebrate with young people and the key people in their lives.

12.2 The event is funded by the retained PPG and each celebration event has a theme which is used throughout. The theme for the celebration event that covered the past academic year was Winter Wonderland and was held in December 2023, over 150 LAC ranging from 3 – 18 were celebrated and approximately 200 people were in attendance including members of the corporate parenting committee.



13.0 Extended Duties for all Children with a Social Worker

13.1 The ExDT has delivered direct work with 148 children during 2022/23, with the team maintaining a maximum caseload of 50 children at any one time. This group includes children educated out of borough, those who have experienced the most fractured education, children with very low attendance and who are at risk of permanent exclusion. Children on the waiting list are seen within two weeks for assessment of needs and work will typically start within three weeks.

13.2 Approximately 60% of all referrals are listed as attendance concerns due to mental health issues (social anxiety disorders), social and emotional issues, previously undiagnosed learning difficulties, gang affiliations and parental issues (parents with mental health problems, parents keeping children off school, parental lack of engagement). A third of the referrals relate to children at high risk of permanent exclusion from out-of-borough schools and children's parents needing support to help their children to access education and educational support. Examples of the work undertaken include:

- Preventing the exclusion of a Year 7 pupil attending an academy school in a neighbouring borough and supporting the school to access resources cross-borough.
- Providing training at the Designated Safeguarding Leads Conference about the needs of Children on CIN/CP plans and where to find support for them.

14.0 Strategic priorities for BVS for 2023/24

14.1 The core values of the virtual are attendance, achievement and aspirations and these values remain at the centre of everything that BVS do. Building on the achievements in 2022/23 and identified areas of improvement, the priorities for the next academic year are as follows:

- a) To continue to work closely with schools, social care colleagues, carers, and young people to drive up attendance, particularly in Key Stage 4.
- b) To co-design EET and enrichment programmes utilising the Post-16 funding to support young people to ensure that their needs and aspirations are addressed.
- c) To implement a way of working with all children known to a social worker, including those in kinship placements, that mirrors, as far as possible the offer to LAC
- d) To continue to provide an enrichment curriculum both online and onsite and rooting this into the interest of looked after children.
- e) To use early identification to ensure that the necessary support is in place for LAC in Key Stage 4, who are likely to underachieve in their GCSEs.

15.0 Stakeholder and ward member consultation and engagement

15.1 Stakeholder consultation and engagement takes many varied methods within the service, and we are committed to evaluating and developing new and creative ways of hearing from stakeholders.

15.2 Carers views are sought through one-to-one discussions with their linked advisory teacher/worker, PEP, and Support Groups. Carers are encouraged to provide written on the work of the virtual school.

15.3 Children and young people provide feedback through discussions with their social worker, IRO, school or linked advisory teacher/worker, Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings, and Participation activities.

16 Financial Considerations

16.1 There are currently no financial considerations arising from this report.

17 Legal Considerations

17.1 There are currently no legal considerations arising from this report.

18 Climate Change and Environmental Considerations

18.1 There are no climate change or environmental considerations.


19 Communication Considerations

19.1 At this stage there are not any communication considerations.

Report Sign-Off

Nigel Chapman

Corporate Director Children and Young People

 Brent	Corporate Parenting Committee 22 April 2024
	Report from the Corporate Director of Children and Young People
	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools - Cllr Gwen Grahl
Brent Fostering Service 6-monthly Monitoring and End of Year Report: 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2024	

Wards Affected:	ALL
Key or Non-Key Decision:	N/A
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: <small>(If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)</small>	Open
List of Appendices:	N/A
Background Papers:	N/A
Contact Officer(s): <small>(Name, Title, Contact Details)</small>	Elena Muller Service Manager, Looked After Children and Permanency elena.muller@brent.gov.uk Kelli Eboji Head of Service for Looked After Children and Permanency Kelli.eboji@brent.gov.uk Palvinder Kudhail Director, Early Help and Social Care Palvinder.Kudhail@brent.gov.uk

1.0 Executive 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. It includes relevant data on the service's performance and activities, as well as updates on the functioning and progress of the Fostering Panel. Additionally, the report outlines the developments that have taken place in the Service throughout the year, as well as any planned initiatives for the upcoming period. This is in accordance with standard 25.7 of the Fostering National Minimum Standards (2011).

1.2 Brent Fostering Service operates in accordance with the Fostering National Minimum Standards, the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010. These regulations are the foundation of the regulatory framework for fostering services under the Care Standards Act 2000. This report details the activity of Brent's fostering service from the 1 October 2023 to the 30 March 2024 and provides an "end of year" position.

2.0 Recommendation(s)

2.1 The Corporate Parenting Committee is requested to review and comment on 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 Brent Looked After Children.

3.0 Detail

3.1 Contribution to Borough Plan Priorities & Strategic Context

3.1.1 This report sets out the management of the local authority's inhouse fostering service and the developments that have taken place in the reporting period. The work of the fostering service contributes to the following borough priorities:

- **The Best Start in Life**
- **Prosperity and Stability**
- **A Healthier Brent**
- **Thriving Communities**

In order for care experienced young people to have the best start in life, prosperity and stability, safety, and good health they need safe, stable homes with primary carers who love them and who are able to meet their holistic needs. The fostering service contributes to these priorities by recruiting, assessing, and supporting foster carers and connected person carers for Brent children and young people. Providing safe, stable, loving placements for children and young people when they are unable to remain with their parent/s, means that they will have the best life chances.

4.0 Background

4.1 Service Priorities

4.1.1 The in-house fostering function is located within the LAC and Permanency Service (LACPS) of the Children and Young People's Department. The service focused on the following priority areas in 2023/24:

- To have a strong focus on recruitment, assessment and approval of new carers with the view to achieve a net gain of 10 new carers by the end of the

financial year

- To enhance the support offer to Brent's foster carers and kinship carers, by providing therapeutic services and other additional benefits to increase placement stability
- To enhance the training and development programme for carers to include a permanent, ongoing mix of virtual and direct delivery of courses and seminars
- To continue improving the stability of children by providing more local and in-house placement options, minimising change of social workers and placements
- To develop partnerships with neighbouring authorities to recruit and retain more foster carers
- To recruit, train and retain foster carers that offer emergency placements to children and young people who come into care in unplanned circumstances
- To continue to develop and transform the service in consultation and collaboration with care experienced young people and foster carers through workstreams and co-designed training
- To ensure that the foster carers feel supported and valued by providing regular service updates, building and strengthening Brent foster carers community and celebrating their achievements.

4.1.2 Achievements in 2023/24 against our priorities:

Unfortunately, we have not achieved our recruitment target of new mainstream foster carers in this reporting period. We had **3** new mainstream foster carers approved in 2023-24. This was a net increase of **-4** as there were **7** mainstream carers who resigned/approval was terminated in the same period. This was compared to a net increase of 1 new mainstream foster carer in the previous year (2022-23).

The newly recruited carers ranged from early 40's to mid-late 60's in age and were from either an Asian or Black British heritage, which meets our target demographic.

The Corporate Parenting Committee is aware of the challenges the service has faced in recruiting new foster carers and the work that has been undertaken over the past 12-18 months to improve our ability to recruit and retain our carers, which we anticipate will have a positive impact on our mainstream fostering numbers in the next financial year.

Our achievements and successes:

- The recruitment team was very active in the community during the summer and attended a number of community events to raise awareness about the need to recruit local carers. As a result, the number of enquires and assessments have increased in the reporting period.
- The Fostering Team celebrated the achievements and commitment of the foster carers by organising 3 main events last year. The Cream Tea in May during the Foster Care Fortnight, the seaside trip in August and the End of Year Celebration in November were well received by the carers and their

families and contributed to the strengthening of Brent's fostering community and carers feeling valued and appreciated.

- A new and improved fostering offer has been approved which will improve the recruitment and the retention of the inhouse foster carers thereby providing more local placements for Brent's looked after children who will enable them to stay connected to their families, community and network.
- Brent, and 7 other neighbouring West London local authorities (Ealing, Harrow, Hounslow, Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea, Westminster and Hillingdon), have received funding from Department for Education for a project to improve recruitment and retention of foster carers in September 2023 and a new joint fostering recruitment hub (dedicated "front door" for fostering enquiries) was created and will be operational from April/May 2024.
- Brent has received Department for Education funding to implement our first Mockingbird constellation in the next 12 months, which will provide a model for support and community which will result in better carer retention.
- A new test and learn project was initiated in November 2023 called the Looked After Children's Resilience Service (LRS). This provision replicates the system wide approach of the Hospital Discharge Service and supports, trains and further upskills Brent foster carers, through bespoke training and in-reach placement intervention to increase placement stability and to better meet the children's needs. Brent foster carers have engaged well with the project and the feedback received so far has been positive.
- A new and attractive fostering brand has been developed in collaboration with the Brent Communication Team which will be launched in May 2024 during the Foster Care Fortnight. In addition, Brent has joined a growing partnership of councils and children's trusts and CAN Digital to promote Local Authority fostering. As part of this project short film called 'Any of Us' was launched nationally in September 2023 and it is envisaged that it will encourage people to foster for Brent.

4.2 Staffing Arrangements

- 4.2.1 The structure of the Fostering Service has remained the same since the last report. The Fostering Service consists of two teams: one Support and Assessment Team, and one Kinship Care Team. The service is overseen by the Service Manager.
- 4.2.2 The Fostering Support and Assessment Team consists of 8 supervising social workers, one Team Manager, and one part-time Recruitment Officer (RO) post.
- 4.2.3 The Kinship Care Team consists of 8 social workers, one Team Manager and one Practice Consultant Social Worker.
- 4.2.4 The workload in the fostering team continues to be at manageable levels, whilst the Kinship Team has experienced an increased number of cases over the reporting year as new kinship carers are assessed, approved and allocated to supervising social workers for ongoing support. Kinship care

can offer children the stability and love they need where there is family breakdown through the continuation of existing relationships with extended family members or friends, which we continue to prioritise where safe and appropriate.

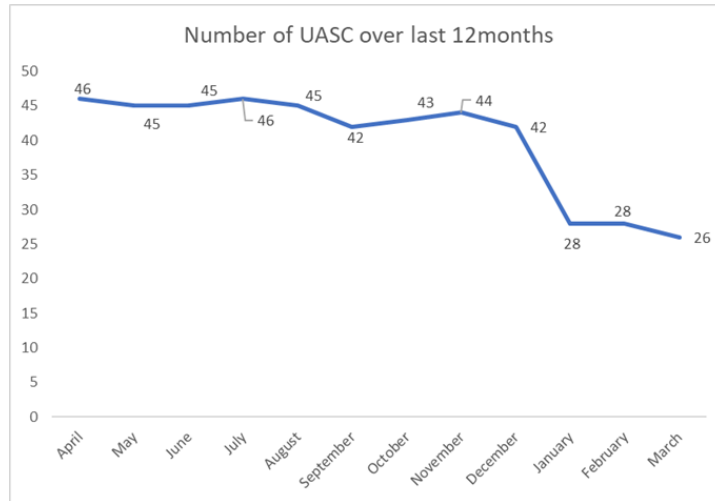
4.3 Placement Activity

4.3.1 The total number of looked after children as of 31 March 2024 was 297, which is a decrease by 22 children from 31 October 2023 (319).

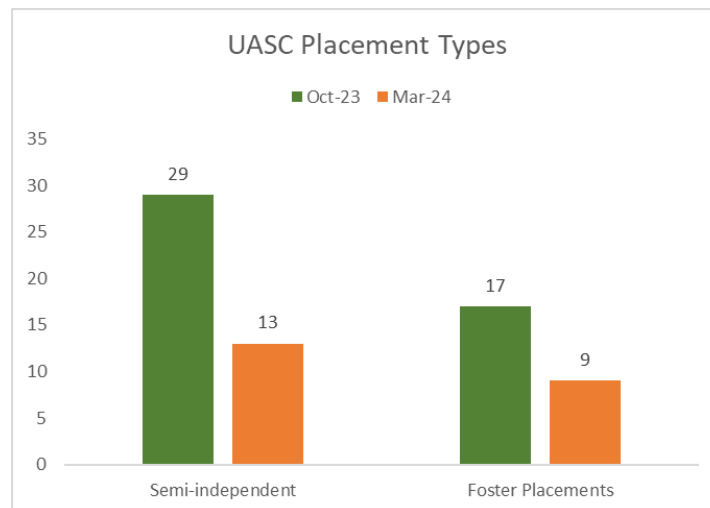
4.3.2 The corporate performance targets for 2023/2024 are as follows:

- Percentage of looked after children placed with in-house (Brent) foster carers as of 31st Mar-2024 was 17.8% (53 children), an increase by 1.2% from 31st Oct-2023, 16.6% (53 children) – below the annual target of 25%
- Percentage of looked after children placed with a relative or family friend as of the 31st Mar-2024 was 15.8% (47 children), an increase by 1.7% from 31st Oct-2023 (14.1%, 45 children) – below the annual target of 20%
- Percentage of looked after children placed with independent fostering agencies as of 31st Mar-2024 was 32% (96 children), a decrease by 1% from 31st of Oct -2023 (33%, 105 children) – below the annual target of 25%
- Percentage of looked after children overall within foster placements as of 31st Mar-2024 was 66% (196 children), an increase of 2.4% from 31st of Oct- 2023 which was 63.6% (203 children) – below the annual target of 70%. This is primarily related to the age of new looked after children and the increase in the number of 16 - 17 year-old UASC who were placed in semi-independent accommodation
- There were 44 looked after children in semi-independent accommodation (residential accommodation not subject to Children's Home Regulations) as of 31st Mar-2024, which represents 14.8% of all looked after children. This is a decrease by 2.4% from 31st Oct-2023 (17.2%, 55 children).

4.3.3 There were 26 Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) as of 31st Mar-2024, a decrease of 16 UASC (42 UASC as at Oct-2023). The decrease is attributable to the number of UASC turning 18.



4.3.4 The number of UASC placed in semi-independent accommodation as of 31st Mar-2024 was 17 compared to 29 UASC as at Oct-2023, none in residential children’s home and 9 UASC placed in foster placements, compared to 13 UASC as at Oct-2023.



4.4 Recruitment and Assessment of new foster carers

4.4.1 During this reporting period, the monthly information evenings were held on Zoom, and the team attended both face-to-face and online recruitment events targeted at communities in various parts of the borough. The recruitment activity continued to be focused on specific local groups with a high fostering potential, such as the local pensioners group (aimed at those younger retirees who have time, space and capacity) and faith groups.

4.4.2 The recruitment officer joined all Brent Connects online sessions from September to December 2023, to talk about the impact of fostering in the borough and raise awareness about the increased need for local carers. Good engagement was noted during the presentation with participants showing a genuine interest in fostering, thus helping to raise the profile of the service during the event.

- 4.4.3 The Fostering team responded positively to an invitation from the Eastern European Hub to attend one of their events in December 2023 where the team met the Romanian community, who make up one of the largest minority groups in the borough. The team had the opportunity to gauge the appetite for fostering within this minority group and establish a relationship with the Eastern European Hub team who agreed to support the service's recruitment efforts.
- 4.4.4 The Fostering Team attended the Brent Multi-faith forum meeting at the beginning of March 2024 to raise awareness of the need to recruit more Brent foster carers, with the focus on being able to offer local placements to Brent children who will be more likely to maintain family ties and remain part of their community and network.
- 4.4.5 Leaders and representatives of the faith groups expressed their interest in supporting the Fostering Service to recruit local carers and made an open invitation to return to the multi faith forum in the future once the new fostering offer had been launched. Some faith leaders expressed an interest to support the recruitment of new foster carers by inviting the Fostering team to meet their congregation and their respective communities.
- 4.4.6 The Fostering Service joined a number of health-focused events organised by the Brent Health Matters team during this period. These events were aimed specifically at minority community groups, like the Somali community. The team was able not only to speak to people and distribute flyers and branded merchandise but also to receive valuable feedback about some of the misconceptions and barriers to fostering.
- 4.4.7 A short satisfaction survey has been drawn up and emailed to all Brent foster carers, inviting them to comment on the quality of the support received from the service, the relationship they have with the wider professional network and the aspects they want to see improved. It is envisaged that the foster carers will be invited to complete this type of survey on a 6-monthly basis in order to understand the carers' expectations, to further develop the service and to establish its goals and priorities. The current survey is open until the end of April and the findings will be shared in the next fostering report.
- 4.4.8 The Fostering Newsletter continues to be delivered monthly to the 4000+ subscribers.
- 4.4.9 In the reporting period, the fostering team received **20** enquiries. Phone calls and web requests for call-backs were the two most popular ways for people to contact the fostering team. **10** applicants had an initial visit and **3** progressed to stage 1 of the assessment process and **1** remaining initial visit was moved from March to April (due to applicant's availability), therefore it is still pending a decision. The remaining **6** applications required 'no further action' for reasons including: housing situation and decision to foster for independent fostering agencies (IFAs) due to higher allowances which is addressed in section 7.

4.4.10 In this reporting period there are 10 assessments in progress. Of these:

- 5 are in stage 1
- 5 are in stage 2.

4.4.11 Of the 4 assessments in Stage 2 reported in the last 6 months, 1 applicant was approved in December 2023, 1 applicant withdrew due to personal circumstances in November 2023 and 2 applicants will attend the Fostering Panel in April and May 2024. The assessment could not be presented to the Fostering Panel in a timely manner due to the delay in receiving statutory checks.

4.5 Support from Supervising Social Workers (SSW)

4.5.1 The retention of foster carers is and has been one of the Fostering Service's main priorities. The foster carers continue to report positive relationships with their supervising social workers and the feedback received during their annual reviews and attendance to panel, has highlighted the importance of the support received from the highly skilled and experienced supervising social workers. The quality of the relationship they have with the social workers has been cited as the main reason for their commitment to Brent. The foster carers report being able to contact their supervising social worker when in need and receiving appropriate level of support and guidance during difficult periods.

4.5.2 The fostering team works closely and in partnership with the Children's teams (Localities and Care Planning teams) to ensure that the care plans are progressed without delay and the children's needs are met whilst receiving the best care. The supervising social workers and team managers attend placement planning and permanency planning meetings, looked after children's reviews and all other relevant statutory and non-statutory meetings, supporting their foster carers to build positive relationships with the 'team around the child'.

4.5.3 Placement stability is an important factor in offering an effective fostering service and is crucial to ensuring that Brent delivers good outcomes for each child in care. Placement stability meetings are now embedded in practice with children's social workers making a referral for stability meetings in a timely way. Over recent years, there has been considerable focus on supporting foster carers to maintain placements. With the launch of the West London Fostering Hub, our joint West London fostering front door, and an overall improved core offer for foster carers, it remains a necessary and priority task to ensure that foster carers and their families feel supported in their valuable role.

4.5.4 In addition to the support the carers received from social workers, the foster carers attend monthly support groups organised and facilitated by the Fostering Service. This is an informal and relaxed event where foster carers new and more established are able to meet and get to know each other. This works well to provide support to newly approved carers. The monthly foster

carers' support group continues to be facilitated virtually as this remains the foster carers' preferred option.

- 4.5.5 The fostering service with the support of the Brent Communication team keep foster carers engaged and informed by providing a monthly newsletter.
- 4.5.6 On 24 November 2023, the Fostering Team organised the Annual Celebration Event which was a great success and well attended by carers. The Foster carers brought along their family members or nominated carers to celebrate their hard work and commitment to fostering with good food, magic and a live performance by a talented care leaver. 79 people took part in the end of year celebration event.
- 4.5.7 Some of the carers received recognition for outstanding achievements, where they went over and beyond their role and duty to support children and young people, The Deputy Mayor, the Cabinet member for Children, Young People and Schools, the Corporate Director and the Director Early Help and Social Care were in attendance and joined the rest of the team to thank the foster carers for their invaluable contribution to the community and their love and dedication to the looked after children.



Feedback received from the foster carers:

From SA, foster carer for 3 children: *“I just wanted to thank everybody for the nomination at the Foster Carers' Annual Celebration. I really enjoyed the party. It was well organised and I had lots of fun. I also wanted to thank the whole fostering department for all of the work and effort the team puts into helping the children and foster carers, we couldn't do it without you. Thank you so much for the nomination. I'm truly grateful and honored to receive this award”.*

From JB, foster carer for one child: *“I really enjoyed the celebrations and felt very appreciated. The idea of the awards were great and I am very proud to be part of such a great team of staff and foster carers”.*

From JG, foster carer for one child (and Brent adopter): *“I would just like to take this opportunity to thank you to you all, (especially my supervising social worker). Without the support and hard work that you all do and having my social worker at the end of the phone along with the rest of the team, make everything we as carers do a lot easier. You are always thanking us, but*

you guys need thanking too ...so here's too many more years of working with you all. Thank you for everything you all do for us families and the children we care for."

4.6 The Kinship Care Team

- 4.6.1 The Kinship Care team undertakes both planned and emergency assessments of prospective family members and friends who come forward as alternative carers when it is not possible for a child to remain in the care of their parents. The team provides placement support to the connected persons carers and training during the assessment period.
- 4.6.2 In the period from October 2023 to March 2024, Kinship Care team received 74 referrals for viability assessments of a relative, friend and people connected to the child. In the period from April 2023 to Sept 2023, Kinship Care team received 85 referrals.
- 4.6.3 In this reporting period, following a positive viability assessment, 40 Connected Persons assessments were undertaken. 2 of these assessments did not progress as further assessment was not required. 5 carers withdrew and did not wish to be assessed further.
- 4.6.4 24 children were placed in 18 new Reg 24/ Connected Persons placements between October 2023 and March 2024.
- 4.6.5 Children who remain in kinship placements beyond 24 weeks where the carer has not been approved as a Connected Persons carer (following presentation and recommended for approval at the Fostering Panel) are considered to be in unregulated placements. For the reporting period, there were 11 children in 9 unregulated placements (some placements were made prior to October 2023). A risk assessment has been completed for each of these placements which has been signed by Head of Service and there continues to be close monitoring of these placements by visiting the placements weekly until the carers assessment is presented at the Fostering Panel and the approval is ratified by the Agency Decision Maker for the Fostering Service.
- 4.6.6 Five Connected Persons foster carers were presented to the Fostering panel between October 2023 to March 2024, all of whom have been approved as short-term Connected Persons carers.
- 4.6.7 Seven children were made subjects to Special Guardianship Orders in this reporting period. 4 were private applications and 3 were as an outcome of public care proceedings.
- 4.6.8 Kinship Care Week took place during the first week in October 2023. The Kinship Care team in collaboration with the Brent Kinship Carer Peer Volunteer, Brent Health Matters, Brent Community Engagement Team, Virtual school and Adopt London West hosted and took part in a series of events to mark Kinship Care and share the mutual appreciation and commitment of Brent kinship carers. These events included:

- Library display in the Civic Centre between the 2 to the 6 October 2023 about Kinship Care through time as reflected in literature. Banners were placed in the foyer promoting the Kinship Care week and leaflets were distributed to raise awareness of Kinship care.
- 'Meet and Greet' on the 5 October 2023 provided Special Guardians and Kinship carers the opportunity to meet the Kinship Care Team and have an informal discussion.
- Kinship carers and their families were invited to attend the Fun Day on the 7 October 2023 which took place at Bridgestone Arena. The London Fire Brigade attended the event and spoke about the work they do and invited the children and their carers to step into the truck and see equipment etc. There were 3 kinship carers in attendance and 8 children participated in activities. Brent Health Matters were present at event and provided information on local health services. The Mayor of Brent and Lead Member for CYP attended the second half of the event. The feedback received from carers was positive and they enjoyed the event.

Brent Kinship Team will continue to work with partner agencies and other council services to raise awareness of the support services and resources available to kinship carers by attending different outreach events in the community and by keeping carers informed via newsletters and other communication methods of the universal offer within Brent. Our learning from the work and events in 2023-24 has been related to the importance of co-production and co-ownership with kinship carers. We are committed to working in partnership with our carers to plan and design engagement activities in 2024-25, and we would like to develop this approach with children in kinship placements as well.

4.7 Fostering Panel

- 4.7.1 The Fostering Panel is 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 is an independent person with professional and personal experience of fostering. Most of the independent panel members have personal experience of the fostering system, including one independent panel member who was brought up in a kinship arrangement. The work of the Fostering Panel is supported by the Panel Adviser.
- 4.7.2 One new Panel members has been recruited in the last 6 months. Of the 3 independent panel members recruited in the previous period, 2 have been attending regularly and one has had a change in personal circumstance and did not take up to offer to become an independent panel member.
- 4.7.3 Fostering Panels are generally held three times every two months and extra panels are arranged if there is an increase in demand. Most panels take place virtually; and face to face when the number of cases presented is high.

- 4.7.4 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) 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.
 - The long-term fostering matches of all children below the age of 12.
- 4.7.5 During this period October 2023 to March 2024: 9 panels were held with 28 cases presented of which:
- 5 were recommended for approval as short term connected persons
 - 1 was recommended for approval as short term carer
 - 9 carers were re-approved as part of their 3 yearly annual review
 - 2 carers were re-approved as part of their 1st annual review
 - 9 carers whose fostering approval/status were terminated/resigned
 - 1 carer was re-approved as a long term carer.
 - 2 prospective foster carers whose Stage 2 was terminated.
- 4.7.6 All the recommendations made by the panel were ratified by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM).
- 4.7.7 The Head of Service for Looked after Children and Permanency acts as the ADM for the Fostering Service. The ADM, upon reviewing the recommendation of the Fostering Panel, decides whether applicants should be approved as foster carers or not. The ADM also has the responsibility of determining the continued suitability of foster carers following completion of annual reviews of foster carers and recommendation from the Fostering Panel. The ADM meets with the Panel Chair several times a year and observes the panel at least once a year, the last occasion being January 2024.

4.8 Training and Support for Foster Carers

- 4.8.1 The CYP Learning and Development Team within the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service continues to offer learning opportunities for new and experienced foster carers and connected persons using different delivery methods comprising of face-to-face, online/virtual and E-Learning.
- 4.8.2 In the period of October 2023 to March 2024, 17 learning sessions were offered to carers which included 4 workshops via Brent Safeguarding Partnership. With the exception of the First Aid and Understanding and Responding to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) trainings, all the sessions which carers attended took place online.

4.8.3 There has been limited progress in carer participation in learning opportunities since the last report. Training sessions have had to be cancelled or rescheduled due to low booking numbers, such as Safeguarding and Safer Caring, Child Development and Attachment. However low attendance at training sessions continues to be a national issue affecting many local authorities, and Brent is no exception. The Learning and Development Team continue to make efforts and find creative ways to promote and encourage participation of carers in mandatory trainings and other learning offers, such as through regular reminders. The Fostering Panel also monitor and scrutinise the foster carers' training attendance and hold carers to account if the carers are not compliant with this requirement. Moving forward a new system of tracking the Fostering Training and Development using our performance dashboard will assist with improved identification of carers who have not completed or have overdue mandatory training. The plan for the coming 6 month period is utilising the information in the dashboard for targeted invitations offering carers a choice of dates to complete the required mandatory trainings or timeframe to complete online as an e-learning if they prefer.

It should also be noted that as our support increases and improves, we will be offering different development opportunities for carers as part of our therapeutic offer and also the Mockingbird model, and therefore a higher expectation of carers in relation to their commitment and engagement with learning opportunities will be expected.

4.8.4 As part of strengthening relationships, improving the quality of care for children and young people in care, and promoting multi-agency learning, all our carers continue to have access to learning opportunities via the Brent Safeguarding Partnership, multi-agency learning and development offer, as well as the wider Brent CYP practitioner training offer.

4.8.5 The training offer is regularly reviewed to ensure that the foster carers continue to develop their professional skills, deepen their understanding of the looking after children's needs, and have the opportunity to keep abreast with new findings, research and learnings from serious case reviews. For the coming period new learning opportunities include Restorative Practice Approach for Foster carers, and Talking to care-experienced young people.

4.8.6 In addition to facilitated learning opportunities, the Learning and Development Team continued to provide all carers access to learning opportunities at any time of the day, evenings, and weekends, through access to an online E-Learning courses package. There are some limits on the completion of E-Learning courses by carers with some reasons being carer's not having access to computer/ laptops. We anticipate this will improve once all carers have access to our Brent digital offer.

4.8.7 As part of evaluating the effectiveness of our trainings, following each session carers are encouraged to provide feedback- asking carers to share reflections on what they learned and what they plan to apply to their role as a carer; some responses can be found below:

"The trauma river. It was good to get a deeper understanding of trauma and how it can affect children and their families...The course was interesting and engaging. It was good to get a deeper insight"

(Trauma informed Practice)

"The session was very interesting, there was so much I lean that I had no idea about... I appreciate how engaging the group were. It was so clear and easy to understand"

(Supporting LGBT+ Young People)

4.9 Monitoring – reviews, allegations, complaints

- 4.9.1 During the reporting period, there were no allegations made against Brent foster carers and the Complaints Service received one complaint from a parent regarding the care her daughter received whilst in the care of a Brent foster carer.
- 4.9.2 The Fostering and Kinship Teams received numerous positive comments from foster carers during assessments, annual reviews and from other colleagues and professionals. One assessing social worker was praised by the judge for the quality of her assessment and robustness of her analysis. The practitioners' achievements and good practice continued to be acknowledged and celebrated at the bi-monthly LAC and Permanency Forums. Additionally, the Fostering Panel complimented several practitioners for the quality of the reports and their presentation at panel.
- 4.9.3 There have been **56** annual reviews completed in this reporting period.
- 4.9.4 Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) for fostering conduct all the annual reviews of foster carers, ensuring impartiality and providing a safeguarding mechanism for both the child and the carer. The Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer also completes Standards of Care Review meetings, where concerns have been identified regarding carers. This allows a level of independence from the Fostering Service, and the officer will then take these to Fostering Panel where appropriate for fuller discussion and recommendations on continued approval.

Service Development

5.0 Kinship Care

- 5.1 On 15 December 2023 the Department for Education released the National Kinship Strategy – Championing Kinship Care. The Strategy, which aims to put kinship care at the heart of children's social care, included proposals to match the payment of financial allowances for Special Guardians, with the foster carer allowance rate; guidance to employers to improve the support they offer to kinship carer employees; an extension of the Virtual School to cover children in kinship placements and further investment in peer support initiatives. In addition, the government published a definition of kinship care which aims to improve visibility and understanding whilst the term 'family and friends care' is replaced with kinship care.

- 5.2 The kinship care strategy outlines a number of positive steps to better support the development of kinship arrangements, however, there is a lot of detail to work through. The Kinship care team will continue to work with the Kinship Care Peer Volunteer, Virtual school, HR and other external organisations to promote the voice and interests of Kinship carers in Brent and to implement the government plans as set up in the new strategy.
- 5.3 Brent has a track record of outstanding support for its kinship carers and is already compliant with a lot of the new requirements as set out in the recent strategy. Brent is already paying the qualifying kinship carers/special guardians a financial allowance equivalent to the allowance foster carers are entitled to. Brent kinship carers already receive bespoke training during the assessment stage and have access to ongoing training and support once approved. The new Brent Fostering Friendly Employer policy will also include kinship carers.
- 5.4 The website will be updated to include the necessary changes in the way we work with families and children in kinship arrangements and the support that they receive as the strategy progresses. Brent will continue to engage family members, friends and connected persons from the outset to identify the most appropriate caring arrangements for the children they care about.
- 5.5 The Kinship Care and Support policy has now been reviewed and updated and will be published in April 2024 once it has been signed off.
- 5.6 In light of the government's new kinship strategy a new professional network meeting will be organised to update the network regarding the new requirements and to finalise the guide for kinship carers and professionals of the organisations that offer service and support to Brent Kinship community.
- 5.7 The Kinship Care Team has been working closely with Brent Health Matters and Brent Community Engagement team to raise awareness of the various kinship care arrangements in the community and share information about the support available to the carers through statutory and voluntary agencies.
- 6.0 Enhanced Support and Resources for Brent Carers**
- 6.1 The Fostering Service continues to remain committed to enhance the support offered to Brent's foster carers and kinship carers by including a therapeutic element to support placement stability.
- 6.2 Anna Freud has been commissioned to provide a targeted mental health via Brent WEST service and emotional wellbeing service for vulnerable children and young people in the Brent as well as support foster carers and kinship carers through consultations and Reflective Carers' Groups.
- 6.3 In addition to individual work with children, young people and carers, WEST also ran the Reflective Fostering programme online for six weeks with an additional virtual coffee morning held before the start of the group. It was

facilitated by a WEST Child and Family Specialist. 11 foster carers were invited to attend the group and 4 foster carers (for 5 Brent Looked after children) attended all seven sessions.

Feedback from carers:

"I have noticed that I am doing more mind checking and it's really helping".

"This course has helped me to understand why I need to understand myself before understanding my child".

"I wait for this group every week".

"This course has awakened a lot of the thoughts of mindfulness and how to stop and pause. I feel that I grew as a human being".

- 6.4 A new test and learn project was launched in January 2024 called the Looked After Children's Resilience Service (LRS). This is a preventative approach, using CAMHS provider collaborative funding and will be tested until July 2024. It will replicate the system-wide approach of the Hospital Discharge Service programme to support, train and further upskill Brent foster carers, identified IFA carers and further local residential children's homes through bespoke training and in-reach placement support so that children and young people with mental health needs can be more effectively met. Work with foster carers will seek to reduce the number of fostering placement breakdowns that result in higher-cost residential placements.
- 6.5 To date the LRS has received 13 referrals for children aged between 4 to 16 and is currently working with 8 families across Tier 2 and 3. They have delivered 32 hours of training content in Tier 1 and have celebrated the first foster carer graduate of the universal training offering.

7.0 Recruitment and retention

- 7.1 Recruitment and retention remain a key priority for the fostering service, national trends and benchmarks for performance and data have helped the service understand its own strengths and plan for development through a joined-up approach and service strategy for growth.
- 7.2 Maintaining those foster homes ensures the growth of the community and ability to meet the need of an increasing number of children but also provides with the options for better matching between foster carer families and children's needs.
- 7.3 Exit interviews conducted with Brent Foster Carers over the period 2020-23 suggest that for those transferring to IFAs or other local authorities, the more attractive financial and support packages offered was a key reason for leaving Brent Foster Care Service. Benchmarking the fostering rates confirmed that Brent foster carers received the lowest rates in comparison to the neighbouring local authorities and if nothing was done, the reliance on IFA foster placements would increase and put more pressure on the local authority budget.

- 7.4 In order to increase the number of in- house foster carers and to reach parity with the other neighbouring boroughs, Brent has developed a new and improved recruitment and retention package that is equally competitive across the sector and rewarding for the new and existing foster carers. A weekly rate uplift across all Brent allowance rates was agreed and this increase will be introduced in two phases over the next two financial years. For details of the new offer please refer to “*Progress report-Brent Fostering Offer*” that was presented to Corporate Parenting Committee in February 2024.
- 7.5 A few additional benefits are also part of the new and improved fostering offer such as: a free laptop or tablet for the foster carers to perform their administrative duties and be GDPR compliant; free gym membership, support to apply for the Blue Light Card and a word of mouth referral fee of £1000 for the foster carers who refer a friend or family member who is subsequently approved to be a foster carer and has a child placed with them. A council tax exemption for all foster carers will be considered for the 2025/26 financial year to encourage more fostering applications.
- 7.6 The service is working with colleagues in Human Resources (HR) to review and amend key Brent HR Policies so that Brent Council can achieve Fostering and Kinship Friendly Employer status recognition.
- 7.7 The Department for Education (DfE) have selected the West London region (Brent, Ealing, Harrow, Hounslow, Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea, Westminster and Hillingdon) for a project to improve foster carer recruitment and retention following the publication of the Care Review in 2022. Hammersmith and Fulham have been selected as the Lead Authority for the region to implement this 2-strand programme, which is fully funded by the DfE until the end of the 2024/25 financial year. The Project is comprised of 2 key strands: the creation of a regional recruitment and support hub for prospective foster and the design and delivery of a regional fostering communications / marketing campaign.
- 7.8 The recruitment of Hub’s team manager and the two recruitment offices has been successful, and it is envisaged that they will be in post by the end of April, beginning of May, when the new recruitment and retention hub will be launched.
- 7.9 Fostering Service are currently working towards implementing and launching the first Mockingbird constellation. The Mockingbird programme is an innovative method of delivering foster care using an extended family model where mockingbird hub carers are specially trained to offer sleepovers, peer support, emergency support, joint planning and social activities to fostering homes. Mockingbird supports children and foster carers by creating extended communities of support around the child and their fostering family.
- 7.10 A project manager has now been appointed, the stakeholder analysis completed, and the communications and engagement plan has been drawn up. The next steps are to agree the Implementation Working Group (IWG)

structure, approach and membership and to recruit a home hub carer and a liaison officer.

- 7.11 The role of the Mockingbird hub carer is crucial to the success of the programme and can be very rewarding as it improves the stability of fostering placements and strengthens the relationship between carers, children and young people, fostering services and birth families.
- 7.12 Information about the Mockingbird family model will be shared with Brent fostering community during the support group in April and during Foster Care Fortnight in May. The qualifying foster carers will be invited to submit their expression of interest in becoming a home hub carer and the interviews are scheduled in July 2024. The successful candidate will be announced in early August 2024.
- 7.13 It is envisaged that the first Mockingbird constellation will be launched in November/December 2024, or earlier if possible. Further updates will be provided in the following fostering report.
- 7.14 Fostering Service has new and attractive branding which will be launched at the same time as the new and improved fostering offer in May 2024 during the Foster Care Fortnight. Foster Care Fortnight is The Fostering Network's annual campaign to raise the profile of fostering and show how foster care transforms lives. It gives fostering services the opportunity to thank fostering families and recruit more foster carers from the local community. #FCF24 will run from Monday 13 May to Sunday 26 May 2024 and the theme this year #FosteringMoments. Throughout the fortnight Fostering Services nationwide will be celebrating the moments that define fostering journeys big and small. The charity, Fostering Network, will take a leading role in coordinating this event nationally and Brent will also take part and arrange a series of local events. Although the plans for the fortnight are not finalised, the Fostering Service will seek to shed the light on the small things that Brent foster carers have done with love that have helped change the life of children in care. The foster carers will be asked to film, record, write, share those moments that have mattered to them and these testimonials will be uploaded on Brent Fostering website and used for future recruitment events.
- 7.15 Brent Fostering Service's new branding and a new slogan which was developed in collaboration with Communication Team will be launched in May together with the new fostering offer. The new slogan 'Share your love, share your life' will now be included in all the recruitment merchandise and together with the new branding will form part of the new Fostering identity. The launch event will look at bringing together members of the public with an interest in fostering, new and established foster carers, partner agencies and elected members, panel members to raise awareness of this great profession, highlight the difference that carers make in the life of young people every day and invite the wider community to support the Fostering Service to increase the number of local carers.



7.16 The Fostering Service is in the process of organising outreach events in different parts of the borough during Foster Care Fortnight, to raise the profile of fostering, and to boost the recruitment and retention efforts.

8.0 Service Priorities for 2024-2025

- To have a strong and renewed focus on recruitment, assessment and approval of new foster carers with the view to achieve a net gain of **10** new carers by the end of the financial year.
- To enhance the support offer to Brent's foster carers and kinship carers, by rolling out the new fostering offer and deliver existing and new therapeutic support to increase placement stability and develop carers ability and resilience in managing more complex and challenging placements.
- To implement the first Mockingbird constellation in Brent.
- To improve the outcomes for the looked after children by providing local and in-house placement options, minimising change of social workers and placements and keeping children connected to their networks.
- To promote and improve the take up of learning opportunities for new and experienced foster carers and connected persons using different delivery methods comprising of face-to-face, online/virtual and E-Learning.
- To consolidate and strengthen the partnerships with neighbouring authorities to recruit and retain more foster carers by working collaboratively with neighbouring local authorities to implement the West London Recruitment Hub.
- To recruit, train and retain foster carers that can offer emergency placements to children and young people who come into care in unplanned circumstances.
- To continue to develop and transform the service in consultation and collaboration with care experienced young people and foster carers through regular feedback and co-designed training and steering groups.
- To ensure that the foster carers feel supported and valued by providing regular service updates, promoting a sense of belonging to a wider fostering community and celebrating the carers achievements and commitment to their role.

9.0 Stakeholder and ward member consultation and engagement

9.1 Stakeholder consultation and engagement takes many varied methods within the service, and we are committed to evaluating and developing new and creative ways of hearing from stakeholders.

9.2 Carers views are sought through one-to-one discussions with their SSW, Annual Foster Carer Reviews, and Support Groups. Carers are encouraged to provide written feedback on their experiences of assessment and panel process.

9.3 Children and young people provide feedback through discussions with their social worker, IRO, or their carers SSW, Looked After Children Reviews, written feedback for Annual Foster Carer Reviews, Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings, Care in Action/Participation activities, Brent Care Journeys.

10.0 Financial Considerations

10.1 There are currently no financial considerations arising from this report.

11.0 Legal Considerations

11.1 There are currently no legal considerations arising from this report.

12.0 Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Considerations

12.1 There are currently no Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) considerations arising from this report.

13.0 Climate Change and Environmental Considerations

13.1 There are no climate change or environmental considerations.

14.0 Human Resources/Property Considerations (if appropriate)

14.1 There are no human resource or property considerations.


15.0 Communication Considerations

15.1 At this stage there are not any communication considerations.

Report sign off:

Nigel Chapman

Corporate Director of Children and Young People

 Brent	Corporate Parenting Committee 22 April 2024
	Report from the Corporate Director of Children and Young People
	Lead Cabinet Member: Cllr Gwen Grahl
Brent Adoption Report 6-monthly report: 1 October 2023 to 31 March 2024	
Wards Affected:	ALL
Key or Non-Key Decision:	N/A
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: <small>(If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)</small>	Open
List of Appendices:	N/A
Background Papers:	N/A
Contact Officer(s): <small>(Name, Title, Contact Details)</small>	Debbie Gabriel, Head of Service, Adopt London West Brent's Regional Adoption Agency GabrielD@ealing.gov.uk Elena Muller Service Manager, Looked After Children and Permanency elena.muller@brent.gov.uk Kelli Eboji Head of Service for Looked After Children and Permanency Kelli.eboji@brent.gov.uk Palvinder Kudhail Director, Early Help and Social Care Palvinder.Kudhail@brent.gov.uk

1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide a briefing to the Corporate Parenting Committee in relation to:

- adoption performance data for the period 1 October 2023 – 31 March 2024
- the progress and activity of Adopt London West
- how good outcomes are being achieved for children.

Information and child level data presented in Section 5 of this report is provided by Brent CYP; the remainder of this report includes the progress and activity of Adopt London West.

- 1.2 This is the eighth report presented to the Corporate Parenting Committee in this format as Cabinet gave approval in April 2019 for Brent council to:
- join the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), Adopt London West (ALW) consisting of the London boroughs of Ealing, Hounslow and Hammersmith and Fulham for the provision of Adoption services and Special Guardianship Support; and
 - delegate authority to the Strategic Director, Children and Young People, in consultation with the Lead Member for Children’s Safeguarding, Early Help and Social Care to agree and enter into a Partnership Agreement with participating boroughs.
- 1.3 The Key Decision was made on 2 September 2019 and, following the TUPE of those Brent staff members who chose to move to Ealing, Adopt London West has been a ‘live’ RAA since October 2019.

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 adoption service is being monitored and challenged in order to promote good outcomes for children. This is in line with standard 25.6 of the Adoption National Minimum Standards (2014).

3.0 Detail

3.1 Contribution to Borough Plan Priorities & Strategic Context

- 3.1.1 This report sets out the provision and management of the local authority’s adoption service and the developments that have taken place in the reporting period. The work of ALW contributes to the following borough priorities:

- **The Best Start in Life**
- **Prosperity and Stability**
- **A Healthier Brent**
- **Thriving Communities**

In order for care experienced young people to have the best start in life, prosperity and stability, safety, and good health they need safe, stable, permanent homes with primary carers who love them and who are able to meet their holistic needs throughout their minority. The work of ALW and the LAC and Permanency service contribute to these priorities by ensuring permanency is achieved for children and young people either via a Special

Guardianship Order (SGO) or Adoption. Providing safe, stable, permanent, loving placements for children and young people when they are unable to remain with their parent/s, means that they will have the best life chances.

3.2 Background - Adopt London West

- 3.2.1 Adopt London West Regional Adoption Agency became operational on 1 September 2019 with a formal launch in October 2019.
- 3.2.2 A comprehensive partnership agreement forms the basis of the ongoing service arrangements. The Partnership Board on which the Strategic Director, Brent CYP is a member of continues to provide the necessary oversight to ensure that the shared service is appropriately scrutinised and supported to deliver improved outcomes for children and adopters.
- 3.2.3 As part of the national RAA implementation and development programme a network of RAA leaders has been established and a national strategic lead appointed. Government published a National Adoption Strategy in July 2021, that sets out ambitions to further improve the consistency of support offered to adopters and achieve innovation and change in various aspects of the adoption system. Monthly meetings take place attended by the Department for Education (DfE) who remain interested and engaged in the RAA delivery model.
- 3.2.4 National priorities have been agreed by the network of RAA leaders and several workstreams established to progress specific elements of the National Adoption Strategy. ALW's Partnership Board and Heads of Service meetings will continue to be informed of practice changes and developments and will closely monitor performance and practice to ensure standards of service to children and their families remain consistently high.

4.0 Responsibilities

- 4.1 As delegated in the partnership agreement between Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham and Hounslow, Ealing (as the host Local Authority for ALW) is responsible for ensuring that children whose permanence plan is adoption in all four partner Local Authorities are matched in a timely way with adopters who best meet the needs of those children. This involves featuring children in various profiling events, via national linking websites, supporting them in adoption activity days and networking events with other Regional Adoption Agencies in London and nationally. ALW is also responsible for the preparation and assessment of prospective adopters, supporting adopters with family finding following approval, and the on-going post placement support to adopters and special guardians. ALW is also responsible for the provision of services to adopted adults and all those affected by adoption who request a specific service or an assessment of need.
- 4.2 ALW provides a service to Brent residents who wish to make a private application to adopt their partner's child. These are non-agency adoptions and often referred to as "step-parent" adoption, or special guardians who may

wish to adopt the child in their care. The team is also involved in completing adoption reports on children who may have travelled from and been adopted abroad; there is a legal requirement for these adoptions to be made lawful in the UK.

4.3 Inter-country adoption referrals continue to be referred to the Inter-Country Adoption Centre, a specialist Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA), with whom a service level agreement is in place.

4.4 Statutory social work in relation to children needing adoptive placements remains the responsibility of Brent CYP. The care plans for children are formulated by the social work teams and agreed by Head of Service for LAC and Permanency. The Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes then considers and ratifies any adoption plans.

5.0 Performance Data

5.1 Brent annual performance data for 2023-24 is not yet published and therefore performance at the 31 December 2023 was:

- **A1** (The average time taken for a child entering care to being placed for adoption): 443 days (424 in the last 12 months) compared with 447 days in 2022-23.
- **A2** (The average time taken from the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child for adoption and a match being approved): 128 days (119 in the last 12 months) compared with 140 days in 2022-23.
- **A20** (The average time between a child entering care and the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child): 374 days (311 days in the last 12 months)

6.0 Child related data

6.1 There have been 4 Adoption Orders granted during this reporting period.

6.2 There are currently 3 adoption applications in the Court process, the remaining children have been placed more recently, therefore, applications are likely to be made for these children within the next quarter.

6.3 There are currently 16 children with an adoption plan who have not yet been adopted. The details of these children's cases are as follows:

- Five children are placed with their new families
- Ten children are subject to a Placement Order, two children will be matched with their new families in the next month and begin the process of introductions. ALW and Brent are exploring potential families for the rest of the children who are subject to a Placement Order

- One child has a plan of Adoption agreed by Brent, but no Court order has yet been granted.

6.4 Early Permanence for Children

For some children it is appropriate to consider placing them with foster carers who are also approved adopters, this is referred to as an Early Permanence placement. This enables the child to be placed earlier than is usually possible and before Court proceedings have concluded. Two of the children placed this year have been placed in Early Permanence placements, allowing the children to spend less time in foster care and begin building attachments to their new families.

7.0 Adopter Recruitment

7.1 20 Adopter households have been approved in 2023/24.

The target for recruitment of adopters remains at 30, however, this is not achievable with the current resource of 2.5 assessment social workers, this will be discussed again at the next Partnership Board meeting.

Of the 20 approved adopters, 55% are White British, 25% are of; Indian, Black Caribbean or Mixed Ethnicity, and 20% are any other White Background. 30% of these approved adopters also identify as LGBTQ.

The profile of adopters recruited in this period does broadly match the needs of Brent children with the exception of Black Adopters. 3 out of 4 Brent children placed this year have been with ALW Adopters, and there are a further 3 Brent children linked with ALW adopters who will hopefully be successfully matched and placed within the next 2/3 months. The lack of Black adopters is well documented and the reason why the Black Adoption Project was established.

7.2 There are currently 39 ALW approved adopters: 18 of whom already have a child placed with them, 12 are in the active family finding stage and 3 families are matched/linked to child/ren, another 4 families have begun the introduction stage with children. 2 families are on hold due to their personal circumstances and are likely to resign as adopters.

7.3 The adoption assessment process comprises 2 stages. Stage 1 assessments should take place within 2 months 60 days, this stage is described as "adopter led", where adopters work through exercises and complete various tasks that contribute to a full and thorough assessment of their suitability. DfE Adoption and Special Guardianship (unpublished) data for 2023 shows the England average for Stage 1 is 134 days, the London average is 176 days, ALW average = 131 days.

7.4 Stage 2 should take a maximum of 4 months 182 days, this is a detailed assessment that is both reflective and analytical. In total, the comprehensive assessment process should be completed within 6 months. ASG unpublished

data for 2023 shows the England average for Stage 2 is 152 days, London average at 171 days and ALW average = 151 days.

- 7.5 There are 16 families in the formal stages of assessment. 9 are in Stage 1, and 7 in or about to commence Stage 2.

8.0 Casework

- 8.1 ALW is currently offering a service to 211 Brent children, families or individuals who are accessing their adoption records – 25 children are allocated to a social worker for family finding, 25 are receiving a Social Work service, 33 are currently receiving an ASF therapeutic service that is under review. 55 people have received an Access to Records service in this reporting year.

- 8.2 There are 128 contact cases open relating to Brent families - 27 direct contact arrangements and 101 active letterbox exchanges.

9.0 Adoption Support Fund

- 9.1 Families who require specialist therapeutic support, are assessed by a social worker and an application submitted to the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) for funding to cover the costs of the therapeutic services. 69 applications have been made to the ASF on behalf of Brent families in this reporting year and a total of £173,173 of funding for therapeutic services received for these families. This is 4 more than in 2022-23.

- 9.2 There are currently no families waiting for an application to the ASF; all assessments for support are allocated.

10.0 ALW Adoption Panel

- 10.1 The role of ALW's panel is as follows:
- to consider the presentation of approvals, reviews, and terminations of adopters' suitability to adopt, following which a recommendation is made by panel members and sent to ALW's Agency Decision Maker (Head of Service) for a formal decision.
 - to consider whether a relinquished baby from Brent should be placed for adoption, following which a recommendation is made by panel members but sent to Brent's Agency Decision Maker (Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes, Children and Young People's Services) for ratification/challenge; and
 - to consider adoption matches between Brent's children and their prospective adopters, following which a recommendation is made by panel members and sent to Brent's Agency Decision Maker (Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes, Children and Young People's Services) for ratification/challenge.
- 10.2 Feedback between ALW and Brent is considered by the Heads of Service quality assurance group and the Partnership Board and shared with Service

Managers in Brent after each panel presentation to aid service development and quality assure the work of the RAA.

- 10.3 ALW Panel continues to take place virtually via Microsoft Teams. Prior to each panel meeting, the Adviser liaises with the applicants and external professionals to support them to access Microsoft Teams to reduce the risk of delay on the day and explain how the panel day will run and confirm that they are able to access the meeting confidentially. Panel members and observers also complete and return a confidentiality self-declaration, attesting to this for the duration of the panel meeting.
- 10.4 During the period under review, 20 new Adopter households have been approved in 2023/24 and 4 Brent children have been formerly matched with their new families by the Agency following positive recommendations from the Adoption panel. 3 children have been placed “in-house” with ALW adopters and 1 child has been placed with adopters from another adoption agency.
- 10.5 Annual training for panel members is a regulatory requirement, a series of practice development discussions have taken place throughout the year with panel members, and all attended London wide training on disruptions in November 2023.

11.0 ALW practice updates

Ofsted Inspection

Adopt London West was subject to Ofsted inspection in November 2023, this was part of the first thematic inspection of Regional Adoption Agencies, ALW were one of six agencies inspected. There was no formal inspection judgement due to Adoption Regulations not being updated to reflect the creation of Regional Adoption Agencies.

The thematic inspection report was published by Ofsted on 26th March 2024, [Regional adoption agencies – thematic inspection report - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1181233/Regional_adoption_agencies_-_thematic_inspection_report_-_GOV.UK.pdf)

Informal feedback was given at the end of the inspection visit, a sample of which is listed below. Inspectors found that:

Recruitment & Assessment of Adopters

- *ALW has skilled & experienced assessment social workers, prospective adopters supported really carefully to understand the needs of adopted children. Assessment work is thorough and analytical, very good standards.*
- *Linking & matching is timely, Adopters return to ALW to be assessed again, practice with same sex couples strong, positive reputation, consistency of support.*
- *Work is relational, there is authenticity & honesty – consultations with psychologists positively support the work.*
- *Early support & transition work identified as a strength, detailed plans made & reviewed, support offered to all parties.*

Family Finding

- *Timely linking & matching, good interface with partners in each LA.*

- *Team Manager – strong knowledge of children waiting & those coming through who may need adoption, early links & matches evident.*
- *Experienced team who carefully consider children's needs, Q&A sessions helpful, meeting with adopters, ALW team chase planning & keep plans on track.*
- *Case tracking is effective, systems in place to track children through process, updates to each Local Authority via each boroughs panels.*
- *Family finders carefully consider children's needs, Q&A sessions helpful, meeting with adopters, chase planning & keep plans on track.*
- *CPR's good, chemistry visits/play dates all important parts of introductions process. CPR support offered to LA social workers, training on core topics offered to Local Authority social workers.*

Adoption Support

- *Maintaining relationships work strong, specialist team, new approach being embedded, passionate about the work, new referral forms designed, emphasis on who is important to the child.*
- *Lots of learning in the service, outward facing, connected, strong learning culture.*
- *Education Support Group is part of a strong offer of support, educational psychologist co-facilitates support group, effective in supporting adopters to challenge schools, role play used, considered a safe space by adopters, supported by worker to access virtual school.*
- *Mediation between birth families and adopters routinely offered.*
- *Proactive adoption support response, effective to stabilise and support families, described as non-judgemental, accessible and available.*
- *Exceptional – proactive, responsive, targeted support, families benefit from a willingness to engage and offer support that has kept families together*

Adoption Panel

- *high expectations challenge quality of CPR's*
- *Panel adviser provides robust oversight, child focussed, understands the needs of children.*
- *Panel membership diverse, quality of analysis clear & consistent, reflected both pre and post panel.*
- *Panel Chair – extensive experience, annual appraisals take place*
- *Panel effective, knowledgeable, open learning culture, positively challenge to improve practice.*

Clinical Psychology

- *Psychologists offer a comprehensive service and are making a positive impact, consultations valued, brief intervention model with families 4-5 sessions.*
- *Psychology service highly effective, supportive to social workers, enhances practice across the service.*
- *Foundations for Attachment training a very positive offer, co facilitated by Clinical Psychologist and Social Worker helps to extend psychological thinking & knowledge.*
- *Psychologists deliver sessions on attachment theories and developmental trauma in preparation training.*

Ofsted did not provide any formal feedback on areas for future development, but they reflected that:

- The Board should consider increasing capacity in the recruitment and assessment team.
- Timescales from initial enquiry to Stage 1 vary and can take longer than we would like, a number of factors influenced the responsiveness in the early enquiry process. A new member of staff is now in post who is responsible for managing engagement with prospective adopters from initial enquiry and we are confident that timely responses will consistently happen from now on.
- The Adoption panel would benefit from additional membership from people with lived experience of adoption who are younger than some of the existing members. 3 new independent panel members have been recently recruited, including an adopted adult, and a male adopter.
- ALW recognise that further development is needed to evidence that the voice of children and others with lived experience inform service delivery, a drama group planned for the Easter school holidays will include activities that encourage young people to share their views and experiences of adoption.

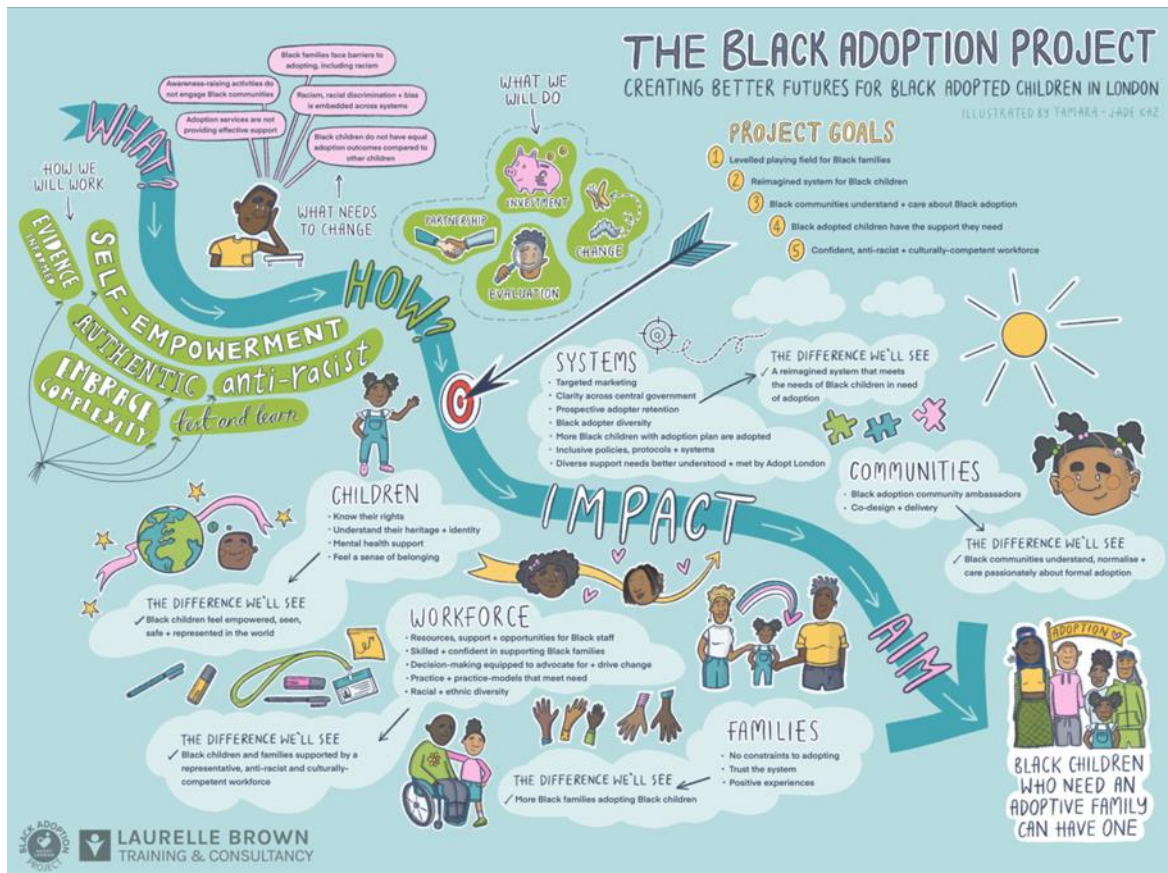
Adopt London Black Adoption Project

As a reminder, the project aims to explore the long standing and persistent challenges recruiting sufficient black adopters for those children with a plan of adoption and the impact on black children.

The project has continued to gain momentum, following the publication of the Phase 1 report [Black-Adoption-Project-Phase-1-Report-March2023.pdf](#) (adoptlondon.org.uk), the steering committee agreed a number of project principles and core work strands, engaged academic partners and developed a 'theory of change'. There have been 2 webinars one in December 2023, the second in February 2024, raising awareness and interest in the project, in excess of 150 people attended each webinar, they will continue quarterly focussing on elements of the research findings and practice developments.

[Black Adoption Project | Adopt London](#)





Three stakeholder groups have been established,

- Young people
- Adopted adults
- We are Family, Adoptive parents group.

The next phase of the project will be the launch of various pilots, to test, evaluate and learn from practice changes. DfE grant funding via the Adoption England network will hopefully be confirmed by the end of April, this will enable a project manager to be employed to implement the pilot projects.

12.0 Feedback

Some examples of feedback received in the reporting period October 2023 to March 2024:

Adopters/Special Guardians:

"Quick note to say thank you so much for all the support you give the birth family with the letterbox. Both children loved the letters and photos that were sent and were so happy to receive a letter from dad for the first time!"

Adopters/Special Guardians:

"Our social worker at ALW has always been very proactive in her support for us. She is keen to attend all meetings and to keep up to speed with our progress with therapy for our adopted twin girls. Just to say thanks to ALW. Without the therapeutic support we have had over recent years, I don't know where we would be right now

Adopters/Special Guardians:

"We have found ALW always very helpful, especially our social worker, who has always been quick to respond and support our family when called upon for advice."

Adopters/Special Guardians:

"I'm really grateful to you (SW) as its down to you communicating and your perseverance with the Tavistock, I really appreciate all of your help and support to our family. T had a good day at school today, which is so positive and good to hear."

Adopter re Foundations

"Just to say thanks to ALW. Without the therapeutic support we have had over recent years, I don't know where we would be right now as a family."

Birth Father

"I haven't shared these things with other people, I feel like you are listening, I feel like my side of the story is being heard for the first time."

Adopter RE: Education Support Group

"I found the podcast helpful... thank you so much. I also found other very useful ones too. I am so grateful, thank you again."

13.0 Stakeholder and ward member consultation and engagement

13.1 There are currently no stakeholder and ward member consultation considerations arising from this report.

14.0 Financial Considerations

14.1 Brent Council's contribution to the cost of running the functions of ALW in 2023/24 was £0.411m.

14.2 The overall benefits of a shared service are also realised through the practice improvement and opportunities that are possible now that small individual services have become part of the wider Adopt London collaboration and the national RAA network. It was previously not possible for LA Adoption services to offer the range of support and services that can now be delivered as a Regional Adoption Agency.

15.0 Legal Considerations

15.1 There are currently no legal considerations arising from this report.

16.0 Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Considerations

16.1 There are currently no Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) considerations arising from this report.

17.0 Climate Change and Environmental Considerations

17.1 There are no climate change or environmental considerations.

18.0 Human Resources/Property Considerations (if appropriate)

18.1 There are no human resource or property considerations.

19.0 Communication Considerations

19.1 At this stage there are not any communication considerations.

Report sign off:

Nigel Chapman

Corporate Director of Children and Young People