

 Brent	Corporate Parenting Committee 21 October 2020
	Report from the Strategic Director of Children and Young People
Brent Fostering Service Quarterly Monitoring Report: Quarter 4: 1st July to 30th September 2020	

Wards Affected:	All
Key or Non-Key Decision:	N/A
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: (If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)	Open
No. of Appendices:	N/A
Background Papers:	N/A
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1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1** The purpose of this report is to provide information to the Council's Corporate Parenting Committee about the general management of the in-house fostering service and how it is achieving good outcomes for children. This is in accordance with standard 25.7 of the Fostering National Minimum Standards (2011).
- 1.2** This report details the activity of Brent's fostering service from 1st July – 30th September 2020.

2.0 Recommendation(s)

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

3.0 Background

3.1 Service Priorities

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

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

3.2 Staffing Arrangements

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

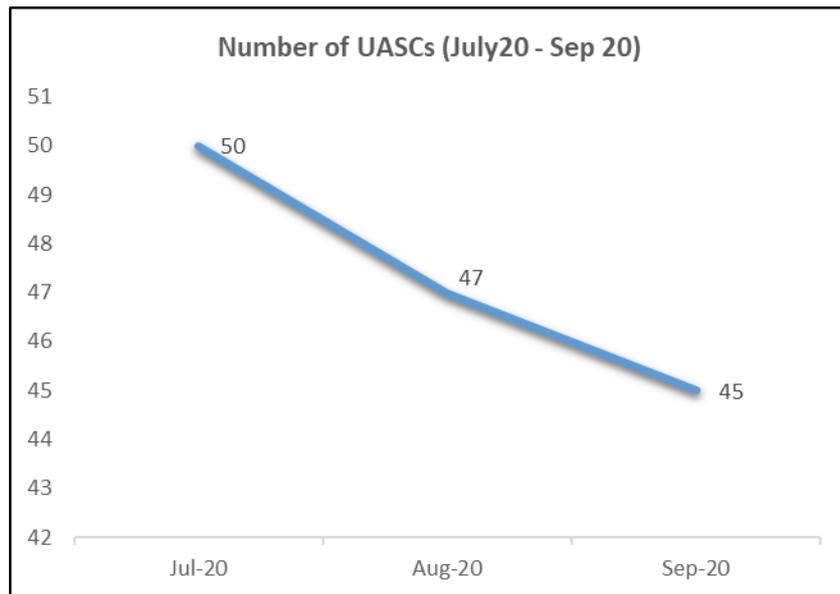
4.0 Placement Activity

- 4.1** The total number of looked after children as at 30th September 2020 was 298, which is an increase of 6 children from Q1 2020-2021 (292 children) and a decrease of 26 children from the same period in 2019 (324 children).

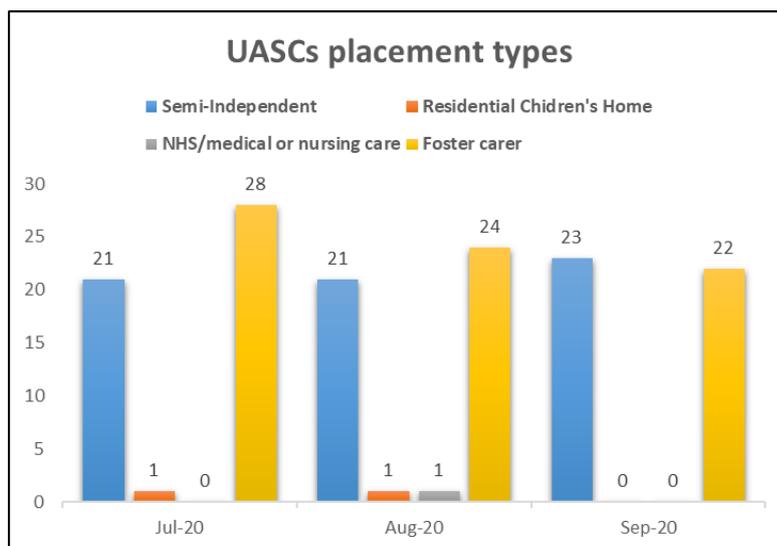
4.2 The corporate performance targets for 2020/2021 are as below:

- Percentage of looked after children placed with in-house (Brent) foster carers – annual target 30% - the actual percentage as of 30th Sept-2020 was 23.5% (70 children), an increase by 0.5% from the previous quarter Q1 of 2020-2021, 23% (66 children).
- Percentage of looked after children placed with a relative or family friend – annual target 15% - the actual percentage as of 30th Sept-2020 was 14.1% (42 children), an increase from Q1 of 2020-2021 (12.7%, 37 children). Brent's commitment to place children within their family and friends' network has continued.
- Percentage of looked after children placed in independent fostering agencies – annual target 25% - the actual percentage as of 30th Sept-2020 was 26.5% (79 children); an increase from Q1 of 2020-2021 (25.7%, 75 children).
- Percentage of looked after children overall within foster placements – annual target 70% - the actual percentage as of 30th Sept-2020 was 64.1% (191 children), an increase by 3% Q1 of 2020-2021% (178 children, 61%).
- There were 50 looked after children in registered semi-independent accommodation (residential accommodation not subject to Children's Home Regulations) as at 30th September 2020, which represents 16.8% of all looked after children. This is a reduction from the 17.8% total at the end of Q1, 2020-2021

4.3 As of 30th September 2020 there were 45 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), 10 fewer than at the end of Q1 of 2020-2021. The Covid-19 pandemic has seen a nationwide reduction in the number of UASC presenting for assistance from local authorities. Additionally, a number of UASC have turned 18 in Brent, which had an impact on the decreasing numbers. This has resulted in an increase in number of care leavers who were previously UASC. Care leavers who are former UASCs make up 31% (n=121) of total leaving care population.



4.4 The majority of UASC are placed in semi-independent accommodation (23, 1 fewer than at the end of Q1, 2020-21, none in residential children’s home and seven fewer than at the end of Q1, 2020-21(29 UASCs).



5.0 Recruitment and Assessment

5.1 Brent’s Marketing and Recruitment Officer (MRO) has continued focusing on online fostering recruitment activity, which suits the present climate of a reduction in face-to-face work. There has been no drop in the number of attendees to the virtual fostering information evening, and a slight increase in the number of fostering applicants.

- 5.2** All marketing activity during this period has been carried out online through the Brent Council website, the Brent Council newsletter, the fostering newsletter, and social media. Interested parties made enquiries via telephone or online and the team carried out initial visits and assessments through video calls, ensuring that the experience by prospective carers was for 'business as usual'. The monthly fostering information evenings took place online via Zoom, which attendees reportedly enjoyed and found more convenient than having to travel to a venue to hear more about fostering. The consistent positive feedback has led to plans for more virtual events moving forward.
- 5.3** During this period a new type of event was promoted – an online fostering coffee morning – that will be taking place on 1st October 2020. This was heavily promoted on social media and through the fostering newsletter and will be reported in the next Committee meeting.
- 5.4** Engagement has continued with all fostering supporters (those who have expressed an interest in fostering but are not yet ready to commit to being assessed) through the fostering newsletter. The number of subscribers to the newsletter almost doubled during July and September, reaching 2,140 recipients. The focus has also been on creating informative blog articles to populate media channels and to educate potential applicants on certain aspects of fostering. The topics included: 'how to choose the right fostering service'; 'what experienced foster carers say about fostering'; and 'what you need to look after babies'. The content produced has generated 1,000 additional website visits on top of the 1,200 recorded by users visiting the fostering information pages.
- 5.5** Out of all the social media channels used, Facebook remains the top one. On Facebook, the MRO engages with members of the Brent community through posts and by sharing information about fostering in small community groups. The MRO has also launched an Instagram page in order to compete with other fostering agencies who have a prominent presence on this network.
- 5.6** The marketing activity resulted in 18 information evening bookings and 13 information evening attendees. Overall there were 15 formal enquiries to foster and 12 initial visits took place during this reporting period.
- 5.7** Of the 12 initial visits undertaken 9 resulted in the applicants being recommended for stage 1 of the assessment process. Some of the reasons for other applications not being progressed were due to the lack of availability of the prospective carer and the need to ascertain more information prior to proceeding.
- 5.8** From the initial visits undertaken in the last reporting period, 3 have moved on to stage 1 of the assessment process and one of the assessments that was in stage 1 has progressed to stage two.

- 5.9** Of the remaining 7 assessments that were in stage 1 in the last reporting period 4 remain in stage 1 and 3 did not proceed due to reasons such as issues with applicants' suitability and a change in personal circumstances.
- 5.10** Of the 2 assessments reported in the last reporting period as being in stage 2:
- 1 assessment was presented to the fostering panel in September 2020 and successfully recommended to foster and;
 - 1 assessment remains in stage 2 and is scheduled to be presented to the fostering panel in November 2020.
- 5.11** In this reporting period there are 9 assessments underway:
- 7 in stage 1 (the remaining 4 applicants will move to stage 1 once they have completed their application)
 - 2 in stage 2

6.0 Fostering Panel

- 6.1** The LACP Service has a Fostering Panel constituted in accordance with Regulation 23 of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011. The service maintains a diverse and highly experienced central list of panel members that includes an elected member. The panel chair and vice chair are independent people with professional and personal experience of fostering and panel members include those with personal experience of the fostering system. Current demand requires three panels to be held every two months.
- 6.2** Fostering Panels have been conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams since 3rd April 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Panels take a little longer due to having to "invite" applicants and workers into the meeting at different times via the application but some practices have been condensed in order to compensate for this so this way of working may be retained for less complex cases.
- 6.3** The functions of the fostering panel are to consider:
- each application and to recommend whether or not a person is suitable to be a foster carer or Connected Person(s) (Family and Friends foster carer) and the terms of their approval;
 - the first annual review of each approved carer and any other review as requested by the service, including those of a Standards of Care issue and those exploring any allegations made;
 - the termination of approval or change of terms of approval of a foster carer; and
 - the long-term fostering matches of all children below the age of 12.

- 6.4** During the period 1st July – 30th September 2020, 3 panels were held with 9 specific cases discussed during these sessions. Within these cases:
- 1 new fostering household was recommended for approval;
 - 2 new ‘family and friends’ fostering households were recommended for approval;
 - 1 fostering household was found suitable to continue as foster carers following review;
 - the approval of 1 fostering household was terminated due to standards of care concerns;
 - 1 fostering household was found suitable to continue fostering following a standards of care investigation;
 - 1 fostering household was found suitable to continue fostering following an allegation made against them by the young person in their care; and
 - 2 fostering households resigned from their fostering role, citing a natural end to their fostering career. They have both committed to continue supporting the service through mentoring new carers in Brent in the future.

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

7.0 Training and Support for Foster Carers

7.1 The Learning and Development Programme

- 7.1.1** Two training courses were offered virtually during the period under review using Zoom, “managing stress in a time of crisis” and “child sexual exploitation (CSE)”, both in September. The feedback in relation to these courses was extremely positive:

“All of the [managing stress in a crisis] course will help to improve and give me a better understanding about stress and how to cope when looking after my children in care.”

“I think the [CSE] course equips carers to look out for looked after children’s behaviours which may indicate their interest to access dangerous websites / wrong friends and emphasises the need for us to share information with CSWs / SSWs / other partners working together.”

- 7.1.2** All carers additionally have access to an online training package provided by an external provider. The training courses offered range in topics from Safeguarding and Child protection skills to therapeutic courses such as life story work and can be accessed at any time of the day and at the weekend in response to carers

asking for more flexible training times. Feedback from foster carers has been positive for all training commissioned. Uptake regarding the online training has been positive and as a result an additional 150 places have been commissioned with the agreed training provider.

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

7.2 Support from supervising social workers

7.2.1 Retention of foster carers is a priority for the team and the support offered to foster carers forms a large part of why carers remain committed to Brent. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the lives of all Brent's foster carers. The cohort of carers is diverse but many are in a high-risk category by nature of their ethnicity, age or pre-existing health conditions. They have continued to support the children and young people in their care by agreeing to take additional placements, at very short notice. The support offered to the carers has therefore never been more crucial or appreciated:

"I would like to personally thank you for all the hard work, time, patience and support you've given me over the years. Without all your input, I wouldn't have been a Brent Foster Carer today so thank you!" N, foster carer.

"Thank you for all your support and understanding in some very difficult moments over the past year. You truly are a peacemaker!" S and R, foster carers.

"We have always felt that you have been a great support to us and we really feel that this is the most important thing... even though you are busy, I always feel that I can call you and you will do what you can to help us and take the time where needed to support us all. This helps us to feel that you really are there for us and have our best interest at heart. You really do make it a joy to be a foster caring family." K and J, foster carers.

7.2.2 To keep foster carers engaged and informed, the fostering service relies on two main communication channels: email and mobile text messaging. A monthly newsletter, which includes generic updates in relation to council and fostering matters is sent out at the beginning of each month, and several other one-off emails go out every time the service has new important updates to share with

the cohort of foster carers. Recent examples of this include: the communications about children returning to school post-lockdown; and updated government guidance in relation to exemptions from the 'Rule of 6'. All email messages are followed up by text message alerts to ensure foster carers are notified whenever a new email reaches their inbox. Using text messages, the service has managed to increase the open rate of all emails.

7.2.3 The monthly foster carers' support group continues to be facilitated virtually in response to the need to socially distance. Foster carers' feedback that they find these online sessions useful and this view is supported by the increasing number of attendees each month – a shared view is that it is easier to commit to such a group without having to leave home to attend. To enable more carers to attend, the groups alternate between daytime (10am – 12pm) and evening (5:15 – 7:15pm) slots. The support groups that took place during the reporting period focused topics ranging from current digital transformations within the department to the annual foster carers' celebration. Foster carers led the sessions and put forward ideas for content and then the fostering teams arrange for guest speakers to attend. The carers proactively use the sessions to inform and update themselves as well as network and meet carers previously unfamiliar to them.

7.2.4 The topic of the virtual support meeting held in July focused on 'finance for foster carers'. At the session, participants shared information on how to register as self-employed and how to do their taxes. Valuable contributions were made from within the collective where one foster carer, with professional experience in the field, volunteered to offer free-of-charge support on using the HMRC services in relation to fostering. A professional from Brent's Virtual School attended the July session to talk support carers about the concerns they had in relation to children returning to school – foster carers received advice on what to do to assess the health risks around this and how to mitigate them.

7.2.5 At the session in August, participants were informed that the annual face-to-face end-of-year celebration is unlikely to go ahead due to Coronavirus restrictions. There have been discussions around organising a get-together that people can attend and carers can feel celebrated without putting their health at risk; it is likely this is going to be an online event. Carers were encouraged to put forward ideas of the form they would like this event to take.

8.0 Monitoring – reviews, allegations, complaints

8.1 A total of 18 foster carer annual review meetings were conducted during the period.

8.2 During this quarter, there was no complaint or allegations made by or against Brent foster carers.

9.0 New Developments

9.1 Update on West London Fostering Project (*Joint Fostering Feasibility Project*)

The Committee has previously been informed about the work Brent has been leading on following a successful bid to Department for Education (DfE) seed funding to scope work using a regional approach to fostering in partnership with Ealing and Hounslow Councils. As mentioned in a previous report, the Covid-19 pandemic has created a delay to the DfE progressing the next stage of this work. Brent has taken the lead on submitting a business case for the next stage of this project. The outcome of the bid is awaited from DfE.

The business case was used to devise a pilot project based on the findings from the Fostering Feasibility Study undertaken earlier in the year. The focus remains on developing closer working arrangements to improve placement stability and choice for adolescent children in the care system between Hounslow, Ealing and Brent. The authorities have proposed the initial work to be on recruiting foster carers for the more challenging 11 – 15 year-olds to prevent them being placed in residential units or independent fostering households.

Further updates will be provided to the Committee as this progresses.